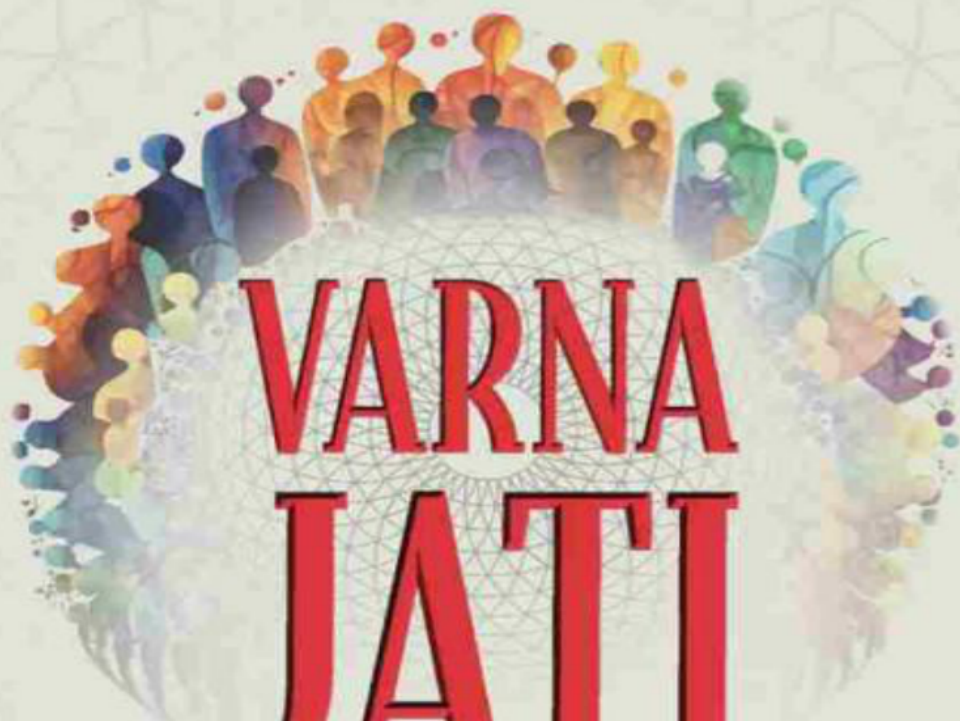


RAJIV MALHOTRA • VIJAYA VISWANATHAN



VARNA JATI CASTE

A Primer on
Indian Social Structures

Varna, Jati, Caste

A Primer on Indian Social Structures

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Chapter 1

The Vedic Open Architecture

This book summarizes the history of Indian social structures. It is meant as a primer for those desiring a working knowledge for themselves as well as for contemporary debates. It is therefore a toolkit for Indian youth today that face a barrage of questions on the subject as well as for journalists and a readership at large with an interest in understanding India and its diverse societies. The book includes a broad scan of the dynamics of Indian society across historical periods.

Unfortunately, the main ideas of this complex system are more often than not taken out of context. This is a topic of considerable importance, especially since Wokeism and Critical Race Theory (CRT) have become dominant frameworks that presume ill-informed ideas on caste. And yet, we haven't discovered any comprehensive treatment that responds to these distortions.

With this book, we aim to fill the gap by supplying evidence-based claims to balance the discourse on this topic. Our purpose is to invite all-round healthy debate.

The topic of caste is in itself multi-layered and inadequately understood that it leaves many Hindus flummoxed, embarrassed, and unable to correctly frame the issues surrounding it. A few reasons for this confusion are:

1. *Varna* is being mistranslated as 'caste'; furthermore, it is separated from the larger architecture of the Indian social system, a system with the following attributes:

- a. An architecture to pursue life known as the fourfold goals (*purusharthas*).
- b. *Ashrama* – the fourfold stages in an individual's life.
- c. *Varna* – the fourfold division of communities based on

occupational specialization.

d. *Ahimsa* or minimized harming as the prime value in all action.

e. Diversity through a dynamic ecosystem with an open architecture.

f. Living in the realm of causation leading to the transcendence of causation.

No discussion on varna is complete without holistically discussing all the above as a system. Thus, it is reckless to pull 'varna' out of such a complex social structure for criticism. This is the problem with Western mainstream academic studies on this topic. Varna can be understood only when the entire ecosystem is considered.

2. Varna should not be judged by modern norms of Hindu society because most Hindus do not practice their varna *dharma*. Varna is associated with performing certain processes and duties. Those following a modern, and opportunistic lifestyle are disconnected from a varna-based society.

3. The problem of non-translatability is serious: varna, *jati* and caste are all different and their distinct origins, applications, and histories need to be understood.

4. Most Hindus today are confused about the realms of *Vyavaharika* and *Paramarthika* (explained in the following section). Rather than undertake a serious study of these, they resort to flippant statements out of expediency.

A basic understanding of Vedic metaphysics is necessary to get an all-round and in-depth insight on the purpose and operation of Vedic social structure. This must be done in the backdrop of universal human goals that a Vedic society aspires. We will give a broad overview of the Indian social order that can serve as a primer to address all issues related to 'caste' as described in Western frameworks.

Vedic Metaphysics

The foundation of Vedic metaphysics is that all existence comprises two different realms, known as Paramarthika and Vyavaharika:

- The Vyavaharika realm is the mode of existence through our sensory experiences. This is the world we know through our cognitive apparatus. All space-time, matter, and causation are part of this realm. This is the empirical view of reality that science recognizes, and where language and the ordinary mind operate. Materialists and atheists believe this to be all that exists.
- However, spiritual and dharmic traditions posit that there is another realm that transcends all this. That is Paramarthika in the Vedic system (a rough analogy could be with Heaven and Paradise in the Abrahamic faiths). This is beyond our sensory experience, beyond the reach of empirical science, and beyond what language can represent. In this mode of existence, there is no constraint of causation in the conventional sense.

These two are also described as *relative reality* and *absolute reality*, respectively. Vedic metaphysics comprises elaborate discussions on these two realms as well as on their interrelationships. The relationship between them has been the subject of thousands of years of debates among the intellectual giants of India.

Everyone, by virtue of taking birth in a body, exists in the Vyavaharika realm where s/he is subject to *karma*/causation and the limits of one's cognition. The ultimate goal of life in Vyavaharika is to gain liberation from the bondage of causation and the cognitive mechanisms that give us all our body-mind conditioning and experiences. This liberation is known as *moksha* in the Vedic system and *nirvana* in Buddhism. Such a liberation from Vyavaharika brings one to Paramarthika. This is not a physical place in the sky but a state

of consciousness different from ordinary human consciousness. Upon liberation, one is said to experience that one was *already and always liberated* but was unaware due to faulty cognition.

Stated in technical terms, the Vyavaharika → Paramarthika shift is epistemological (i.e., cognitive) and not ontological (i.e., physical). In other words, nothing changes physically. It is like waking up from a dream, suddenly able to experience differently.

The path to attain Paramarthika runs *through* Vyavaharika, not through denial or forced suppression of Vyavaharika. The entire Vedic system is meant to facilitate this journey through Vyavaharika. The prescribed Vedic approach is to help us navigate life with Vyavaharika and finally attain Paramarthika. The main elements of this framework are discussed next.

The Goals of Human Life

The goals of human life are organized into a fourfold system (the purusharthas). These four pursuits are:

- *Artha* (food, shelter, clothing, physical, and material well-being)
- *Kama* (desire)
- Dharma (righteous actions in harmony with the cosmos)
- Moksha (liberation or freedom from causation; hence, transcendence of the above three pursuits).

These are universal pursuits applicable to all human beings regardless of cultural, religious, and linguistic differences. Note that the system does not ban pursuits of material wealth and prosperity (artha) or desires (kama); it prescribes responsible approaches to these that are aligned with the overall trajectory towards final liberation.

The Vedic system is designed to help a diverse society of individuals pursue these goals by catering to their different temperaments, sensibilities, and competences. The Vedic structure accommodates everyone while ensuring that society works in harmony with nature.

Vedic metaphysics posits a universe governed by impartial laws, some that can be comprehended by the human mind and others not. Karma is one such law that is not entirely visible for direct perception. It states that nothing happens by chance, and everything is the effect of some cause. This system of causation produces outcomes called karma *phala*, the fruit or result of wilful action. The cosmic system of causation is complex and goes beyond what modern physics recognizes.

The pursuit of one's goals must be balanced with responsibilities towards all other entities including humans, animals, nature, and the cosmos at large. This is the principle of *yajna* that is designed to align one's actions with the cosmic processes. It places one's goals harmoniously with the cosmos. Yajna recognizes the

interconnectedness of everything in the cosmos. A key quality that differentiates it from Western social systems is the emphasis on one's 'responsibilities' and not so much on one's individual 'rights'. This entails giving selflessly towards a higher cause and sacrificing the benefits of the individual ego.

The yajna system is fivefold and assigns responsibilities towards each of the following interconnected aspects of the cosmos: managing one's own wellbeing, serving family including one's ancestors, and serving humanity, nature, and deities.

Ahimsa occupies a special place in the pursuit of all goals. It can be loosely translated as the minimization of collective harm, or the maximization of collective good/harmony. Ahimsa does not mean abstaining from violence altogether. In fact, in many contexts, ahimsa requires engaging in war and destruction to protect the collective harmony. The principle is to optimize universal harmony as the end goal.

Varna and Ashrama Infrastructure

Society needs to be organized with an infrastructure for the optimal performance of the fivefold yajnas in order to efficiently attain the fourfold goals. To achieve this, Indian civilization ensured the distribution of resources, power, and responsibilities via two complimentary systems working in tandem: the varna system (principles applicable to specific occupations) and the ashrama system (principles applicable in specific stages in life). This is the basic infrastructure upon which one could transact in society and attain the fourfold goals discussed earlier.

The varna system helps optimize an individual's *contributions to society*, while the ashrama system helps the individual optimize his or her own *self-growth* in the pursuit of the four goals. The former is collective optimization, while the latter is individual optimization. Both systems complement and complete each other. They are designed to fulfil responsibilities and duties to self, family, community, and the cosmos.

The varna system prescribes:

- duties based on vocation to be discharged in service of the collective society
- restrictions and boundaries of control and influence, designed to minimize conflicts in the use of scarce resources
- rewards commensurate with risks
- restrictions on the accumulation of types of social capital, designed to prevent excess concentration of capital and power.

The ashrama system prescribes:

- responsibilities that differ for consumers and producers in society; an individual going through each of these in different stages of life

- the duration of time spent in each ashrama to ensure a well-balanced life over time
- the nature of custodianship of a certain type of capital

The varna-ashrama system fosters interdependency among diverse entities in ways that are inherent in nature.

The four ashramas or stages in life are: *brahmacharya*, *grihastha*, *vanaprastha* and *sannyasa*. These interact with the four varnas.

- The brahmacharya or student stage of an individual was spent in the intellectual pursuit of specific knowledge. This knowledge had to be imparted free, and thus a student was a high consumer in society.
- When brahmacharis of any varna enter the grihastha ashrama, (the stage of marriage and family) they become the main producers and contributors in the economy.
- Vanaprastha is the stage when the individual begins to withdraw from society.
- This culminates in total withdrawal in the final life stage of sannyasa.

These ashramas are designed to channel individual lifestyles and help achieve their goals consistent with the broader interests of society.

The grihastha ashrama is the only period in an individual's life concerned with the accumulation and distribution of material resources and wealth. Even in this stage, the individual is perceived merely as a temporary custodian of society's resource and capital that are in his trusteeship.

Furthermore, within the grihastha ashrama, the allocation of resources and power is not equal; individuals and groups receive rewards commensurate with the risks undertaken. A Kshatriya, for instance, is allowed to enjoy the pleasures that come with being a member of royalty and enjoys things like recreational hunting because

of the risky nature inherent in his duties in warfare. But a Vaishya's enjoyments are limited to the realm of material wealth.

The idea in the final two stages is to minimize dependence on society thereby reducing one's transactions that cause further bondage. By minimizing one's participation in selfish causation, one's footprint in Vyavaharika is reduced. Sannyasa is intended to take the individual 'off the grid' of societal causation altogether. The old karmic causation gradually depletes itself by playing out in one's life, and eventually one is free from causation altogether. That is the path to Paramarthika.

This system gave every individual the choice to live outside the varna-ashrama social grid. But such an individual could not cherry-pick benefits from society. A modern-day example would be the Amish community in the United States that has chosen to exist completely outside of mainstream society. They are self-sustaining and unplugged from the established American society even to the extent of rejecting taxpayer funded resources like electricity and water.

The following figure illustrates this complex ecosystem. It depicts each varna's occupational roles, levels of risks entailed, and whether the members are producers or consumers in each stage of life. This interdependency explains why varna cannot be surgically separated from the ashrama system and judged by Western norms.

We also begin to see the checks and balances that Indian society imposed to ensure that all individuals, however diverse in skills, goals, and thought, could work towards their personal goals harmoniously, while being contributing members of society with domain-specific expertise and access to, and control of, domain-specific resources. Thus, cherry-picking one aspect of this structure and judging it based on modern societal norms is meaningless and reckless.

It is important to point out that the varna-ashrama system glorified and rewarded individual contribution to society as the highest value, as evidenced by many folk stories and sayings in Sanskrit and vernacular languages. The idea was simply to provide a self-enforced

varna-ashrama infrastructure (without any Church-like centralized authority) to ensure that human freewill doesn't run amok and is instead channeled to maximize contribution for cosmic harmony.

The Vedic idea that everything is a manifestation of the divine results in a collective yajna where everyone and everything is viewed as a contributing member of the collective, leaving no one relegated to the 'victim' status. The Marxist concept of victimhood is perhaps born out of the Christian idea of man being born a sinner and not applicable in the Vedic framework.

India's Diversity

India's diversity is multi-faceted: different languages, food, styles of dressing, aesthetics, culture, deities and modes of worship, spiritual lineages, and so forth. This list is endless. Instead of blindly adopting Western Universalism's approaches for diversity, scholars need to take a step back and study the Vedic metaphysics and social structure that has directly resulted in such unparalleled diversity over millennia. This is not accidental. It is a civilization that has not just 'tolerated' diversity but celebrated it, seeing each form as a unique manifestation of the divine.

Contrary to this, Christianity has a history of stifling the diversity of its native peoples (pejoratively called pagans). Christianity put an end to diversity due to its centralized and monopolistic structure. The Protestant reformation movement broke up the pan-European monopoly of the Church after a lot of violence in Europe. But what resulted were separate church monopolies in different countries. What has been lacking (compared to India's diversity) has been the diversity of thought that emanates from a variety of deities, rituals, and identities. Even the secular movement of Wokeism suffers from the practice of Cancel Culture that prevents genuine diversity of thought.

Therefore, the Western idea of diversity is about superficial differences in skin color and ethnicity, but not mutual respect for diverse worldviews, aptitudes and roles.

Identity is the Bedrock of Diversity

A society that strengthens and nurtures differences with mutual respect is a diverse society. Vedic society hailed and nourished individual differences, giving rise to several identities that keep the individual grounded. The 4 x 4 varna-ashrama system alone gives rise to sixteen identities. The individual's *kula devata* (family lineage deity), *grama devata* (local/village deity), *ishta devata* (personal choice of deity), and other personal customizations give numerous dimensions to individual identity.

Moreover, gender, geography, an individual's role in family, community, and country, each add additional facets to identity. Identity keeps an individual channeled and balanced as a contributing member of society, because many of these identities require specific types of contributions to the collective good.

The Vedic system assumes greater individuality, and hence diversity, than the Western one. The many identities that Vedic metaphysics uses to ground an individual in the Vyavaharika realm has been an obstacle for missionaries and Marxists alike. It is not ironical that the diversity of individual identities is the main target of Wokeism's dismantling mission. Its goal is to destroy the identity grid and render individuals vulnerable so as to bring them under Woke control. This is seen in the prevailing discourse on Gender and Sexuality with a campaign to confuse young people by attacking traditional and biological sexual and gender identities, the last remaining identities for an individual in the melting pot of the West.

The fact that India has remained as diverse as it is today, demonstrates some inherent resilient civilizational structures that have nurtured and preserved this diversity even through the turbulent periods of Islamic and European colonization.

The varna system has been criticized for encouraging the practice of endogamy, i.e., marriages within one's community, but this is a voluntary cultural preference that resists being coalesced into a

homogenized population. The West's melting pot ideal by inter-marrying is considered progressive, but one cannot deny that in the long run it makes society less diverse. Real diversity is possible only when different identities are allowed to exist as per their own choices in an open architecture with no central authority to dictate social policies.

Sustainability

Sustainability is a much-touted buzzword by global organizations like UNESCO, World Health Organization (WHO), World Economic Forum (WEF) and all the major corporations today. But what exactly is meant by sustainability? In simple terms, any ecosystem is considered sustainable if it maintains balance, nourishes all living and non-living entities within it without interfering with others, and is in harmony with the cosmos. This ideal is the very essence of dharma.

Diversity is the bedrock of sustainability; for a system to be sustainable, it must be diverse. In a Vedic society, it is the varna-ashrama infrastructure that sustains such diversity. It helps with the fulfilment of human desires with the goal of ultimately transcending them. It decentralizes social capital with boundaries, rewards risk takers, and yet ensures that excessive competition does not destroy diversity, all the while keeping the individual connected to the cosmos through his yajna. Thus, dharma is fundamentally the path to sustainability.

However, sustainability presently is being defined from a perspective of Western Universalism. This relies on 'diversity' as defined by Critical Race Theory, which seeks equal outcomes from a community of individuals. This is the very anti-thesis of how diversity manifests in nature. For instance, individual members of a given species differ from each other in their qualities, and only through cloning can one create an artificial system in which each individual entity is the same. Such an attitude assumes that everyone is, or ought to be, the same, in attitudes, intelligence, sensibilities, skills, interests, and luck. Differences are seen as the result of social bias and abuse. While no system is perfect, it is naïve to think that all humans are endowed with the same level of skills or other features. This is an artificial construct against nature, and thus not sustainable.

Force-fitting a CRT-based structure that is against nature and the cosmos is neither sustainable nor beneficial. The irony is that these

concepts are widely applied across businesses and institutions even though common sense tells us they are against nature and cosmic harmony.

Vedic metaphysics states that *nature is a being with her own rights*. Western Universalism, however, states that nature is humanity's property and not protecting it would be damaging for industry and the consumerist society. Vedic ideas are thus considerably different from Western ideas of sustainability. The core principles of dharma like ahimsa, vegetarianism, animal rights are not given adequate weightage in Western Universalism. The corporate rubric of Environmental, Social, Governance (ESG) and therefore sustainability is biased; it should not be blindly adopted by Indian society.

The sustainability model based on Western Universalism is also based on social theories that divide society into oppressors and oppressed, and hence thrives on championing victimhood. Diversity is being weaponized by pitting identities against one another as oppressed versus oppressor. Vedic diversity is a model of interdependency among different entities and the goal is to optimize the total ecosystem.

This discussion raises fundamental questions on whose values determine the criteria and goals for this Western concept of sustainability. The problem with the present sustainability movement is that it is a Western-initiated movement. In India's context, it needs to be defined in accordance with Vedic principles. It cannot be a mandate of global elites or the United Nations.

The Western sustainability model championed by the WEF and others maximizes the fulfilment of human desire, a goal that nature cannot sustain. This requires processes like creating artificial meat, changing the DNA of animals and the biology of cows so they don't emit methane, a greenhouse gas. The move to modify nature so that humans can enjoy desires is the exact opposite of Vedic ideals. The following are some terrifying ideas proposed by the World Economic Forum in the name of sustainability:

The WEF wants cows to start receiving Bovaer, a feed additive produced by Dutch company Royal DSM NV. Just a quarter of a teaspoon of Bovaer per day will cut methane burps by a third for a dairy cow, claims the WEF. That should make agriculture climate-friendly but also economically dependent.¹

Whenever you can play God, the WEF is on fire. Globalists are celebrating projects that specifically breed genetically modified starfish and corals in laboratories to “stabilize” the ecosystem in the ocean.²

Now you can take sea urchins and use their innards as a delicacy to make sushi. Is that just a mirage? Because at the same time, WEF, Bill Gates & Co. are working on artificial meat that will one day feed the world. However, while waiting for our laboratory-created meat, we are encouraged to eat bugs.³

To understand the Western idea of sustainability, one must know how Critical Race Theory ideas of ‘equity’ are enshrined in it. The Brookings Institution explains:

Sustainability is now understood to extend beyond the environment to incorporate equity, justice, and opportunity, to ensure the long-term viability of communities.⁴

But as we explained in the book *Snakes in the Ganga*, in practice

these ideologies suffer from several issues: They undermine meritocracy, replace individual rights with identity politics, worsen divisiveness among groups, and thwart academic freedom and free speech by adopting Cancel Culture. The major flaw in the Western model of sustainability, which ironically is ultimately unsustainable, is that it is built upon the glorification of victimhood. But Indians provide counterexamples. Take, for instance, the fact that Hindu immigrants are the most financially successful group in the United States at every level of education and other demographic variables. Some were victims of ethnic cleansing like the Kashmiri Pandits in the northern Indian state of Jammu & Kashmir. Many came from modest backgrounds. Still more left their homelands as refugees driven away during India's Partition in 1947, like the Punjabis and Sindhis. We don't see victimhood camps in these groups. Does Hinduism hold the secret sauce that makes Hindus successful? Does the dharma-based mindset teach people to optimize from the locus of their present circumstances, instead of wallowing in victimhood? Social scientists, however, don't seem to be interested in studying Hindu immigrants for their success.

Because sustainability is possible only with diversity, an index of true diversity would be helpful to objectively measure diversity. A true metric for diversity must include the diversity of:

- Language: How many languages are spoken by at least one percent of the given population.
- Whether religious organizations interfere with other faiths through conversion, which violates the principle of mutual respect.
- How many deities, lineages, independent forms of worship and rituals exist in its mainstream.
- The level of diversity of food, social norms, and aesthetics.

And so forth.

With this overall background, we will discuss varna, jati, and caste

in the following chapters.

Chapter 2

Varna, Jati, and Caste

Caste is a term not found in Sanskrit or any other Indian language. The terminology and the idea of caste was imported into India by the Europeans and in their minds, it referred to a hierarchy of races. As a result, this framework became projected to depict varna and jati as systems of exploitation. The varna system also became compared with systems like slavery or serfdom prevalent in the West. Varna and jati were thus held responsible for many of India's present social problems.

Because of this, scholars have made three cardinal errors:

1. India's social structures have been assumed to be fixed for the past thousands of years and across the diverse range of Indian social groups.
2. All sorts of present-day social problems have been projected back on ancient origins. Vedic or Hindu foundations have been accused of the problems that Hindu society currently faces.
3. The massive disruptions that have repeatedly occurred in India's long history have been ignored or glossed over without factoring in their impact.

The characterization of varna-jati as racism has become a powerful weapon in political movements to dismantle Hinduism. If racism is inseparable from Hinduism – as the claim goes – then as reasonable people, we must all join hands to get rid of Hinduism itself to free society of this scourge.

There is a lot at stake in this discussion. Hence, it is important to gain a proper understanding of the nature of Indian social dynamics since ancient times. This chapter explains how traditional Indian

society evolved during several periods and under various influences, all the way up to the latest social engineering.

While Western scholars have harped on the hierarchy of the Indian caste system, they have conveniently ignored some of the merits enshrined in the varna-ashrama architecture, namely,

- the distribution of social capital which, in turn, translates to the distribution of power within society
- the in-built system that assigns rewards based on risk
- the merits of a social order that hails
 - contribution to the universal/collective over individual
 - responsibilities and duties given priority over rights
- the merits of a social order that ensures that individual growth does not come at the cost of collective wellbeing
- the Vedic vision for a sustainable, diverse, and harmonious society

It is notable that earlier Western scholars had opined favorably about India's varna-jati structures. Many of them wrote that the reason for India's survival despite numerous invasions, famines, revolutions and social upheavals, and conquests by invaders of alien religions, was largely due to these resilient social structures. It was explained that varna-jati also enabled Hindus to resist aggressive campaigns to convert them to Islam or Christianity.¹ For instance, the nineteenth-century French missionary Abbé Dubois, who tried but failed to convert Indians to Christianity, acknowledged that the varna-jati system was responsible for protecting India from barbarism. He said it also provided a responsible government, prevented despotism, and preserved the indigenous arts and culture even under foreign rule.²

An important function of varna and jati has been to integrate the

various diverse social groups into one ecosystem in which communities cooperate, transact, negotiate, evolve, and adapt.³ And yet, maintain an open architecture that resists centralized authoritarianism. This stabilized villages for centuries and helped them function as independent and self-reliant units.⁴ It enabled each ethnic, social, religious, or occupational group to function as part of the social whole while retaining its distinctive character.⁵ The richer members of a varna or jati helped the poorer members and provided them necessary security. It also resulted in the absence of excessive competition, the root cause of exploitation of the weak in many societies.⁶ A healthy society requires division of labor to function efficiently, and varna was a division of labor based on the natural diversity of individuals. This is evident in India's diversity preserved to this day to a large extent: in languages, deities, rituals, food habits, value systems, family, and so forth.

Contrary to these qualities, the ancient varna-jati system is being portrayed as the caste system for exploiting the Shudras, the lowest of the four varnas, and those presumably outside the varna system. However, historical evidence, as we shall explain, does not support such a one-sided picture.

We will use the term caste in the context of present times and varna-jati for earlier periods before the European social engineering that ossified a fluid system into caste. Today, the big debate on caste revolves around the following questions:

- Is caste a *necessary* condition for Hinduism, i.e., to be a Hindu can one avoid caste?
- Is caste a *sufficient* condition for Hinduism, i.e., does conforming to caste automatically make one a Hindu?
- Was caste present in ancient Vedic society? When and why did caste enter Indian society? How has caste evolved over the centuries and what were the causal factors?
- Is there any version of the varna-jati system that would be

compatible with modern-day democracy and capitalism, or are the two fundamentally irreconcilable? In other words, does the Hindu have to abandon caste to become modern, or can varna-jati be modified to serve as India's own social system with *freedom at the individual level*?

- Is caste only abusive, or only positive, or does it have a combination of good and bad qualities?
- How grave is caste oppression today? What is being done about it and what is the progress report?
- Are the handicaps of present-day caste fluid enough to be resolved by education and economic advancement, or is it frozen at birth, in which case it is more robust and difficult to overcome?
- Have Western societies managed to resolve their massive class and wealth disparities? Would the West be willing to abolish birth-based inheritance of wealth from one generation to the next to resolve this?
- Who are the Dalit activists working in the West? What is their position, who supports them, and what is their present global impact?

As we shall see, Indian society has been extremely diverse, fluid, and continually evolving. No single framework can be applied uniformly over time, and it is misleading to assume a fixed and frozen society.

Scholars who study modern caste and social structures typically use the voluminous texts known as the *Dharmashastras* as their main historical source in which jati structures became codified. These were written by multiple authors over a period of several centuries. Let us take a brief look at what the *Dharmashastras* have to say.

One of the most comprehensive studies of the *Dharmashastras* was done by P.V. Kane, a Sanskrit scholar, in his multivolume, *History of*

Dharmashastras: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law in India, published more than half a century ago. Some of the main insights from his research were:

- It is impossible to attribute the origin of what is today called caste to any single source. There are numerous flows and complex interactions that shaped and reshaped the social structures in India.
- There is a great difference between the popular caste practices of today and the conceptions about varna-jati in the ancient and medieval *Dharmashastras*.
- Many statements in the *Dharmashastras* are metaphorical, allegorical, and some of the verses are enigmatic.
- There are apparent contradictions, not only between different texts but at times within the same text. This is exacerbated by the fact that Sanskrit terms often have multiple meanings. For instance, varna can also mean 'color', but it was not used to specify the skin color of people until recent times when scholars gave a racial interpretation.
- There are also factual errors made by Western and modern Indian scholars in their understanding of the *Dharmashastras*.

There is little evidence to suggest that the bulk of the rules and injunctions in the *Dharmashastras* were ever enforced by Hindu rulers, though these texts were sometimes cited in debates. They were used as reference works when it suited someone to support his position, but not considered enforceable or the final authority. They mostly concern ritualistic practices and are descriptive of cosmic consequences of breaches.

Considering all this, it is difficult to frame Indian social groups into neat, absolute categories with clean boundaries. The matter becomes far more complex when one considers that the *Dharmashastras* are merely one of several spiritual texts of the Hindus. In fact, *the*

Dharmashastras are not required in practicing Hinduism. Let us take a wide-angle view of Indian spirituality:

- To practice Hinduism, one must uphold the dharma. Indian traditions are not based on a 'one book' system like the Abrahamic religions. There are numerous texts from multiple exemplars.
- The high level of education in India meant there were always many voices and views, arguing and debating among themselves. The result was the development of the world's largest library of intellectual works. A knowledge system of this kind does not lend itself to uniform ideas and enforced implementation. There were numerous counter movements to the prevailing consensus, and new ideas and groups emerged to challenge the established authority. From its very inception, Hinduism has been a tradition of transmission and lineage. Many different branches emerged from the Vedic tradition with diverse viewpoints, traditions, and ideologies. This produced an open architecture that allowed for reform and evolution such that a Hindu of every persuasion could find his or her spiritual home most conducive to his or her growth.
- There was no tradition of burning the sacred books of adversaries or condemning prior works as heresy or blasphemy. And hence, the proliferation of sacred texts and practices that are sometimes apparently divergent or contradictory but still rooted in the same Vedic sources.
- Among the various Hindu texts, the *Dharmashastras* are not used in the daily lives of Hindus. The texts used by most practitioners on a daily basis are the *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Itihasas*, and *Puranas*. It is rare to find any practicing Hindu that reads the *Dharmashastras* every morning for guidance on how to live his day. On the other

hand, many Hindus read the *Gita* daily, or the *Ramayana*, or chant Vedic mantras, or contemplate on the metaphysics in the *Upanishads*. Unlike most Hindu homes that keep the *Gita*, *Ramayana*, *Upanishads*, or *Srimad Bhagavatam*, almost none keep the *Dharmashastras*. If one were to survey the number of Hindus who have ever come across a copy of various Hindu texts, the *Dharmashastras* would rank below every other text commonly referenced.

- The point being made is that the much-maligned *Dharmashastras* were modulated through the guru lineage, so it never had the dogmatic impact like Abrahamic laws. It was the British in the late eighteenth century, who turned to the *Dharmashastras* to compile what they called *The Laws of the Gentoos* ('gentoo' being a slur referring to 'gentile' people in the Bible). Later, this was replaced by *The Laws of the Hindoos*, an exercise led by Sir William Jones, who called himself Pandit William Jones. Its purpose was to fix one 'standard law' for adjudicating legal cases in the Supreme Court set up by the British in Bengal where he was chief justice.
- Traditionally, there was no centralized Church-like structure with the authority to interpret and adjudicate on social theories. The adjudication of disputes was highly contextualized and based on specific circumstances and individuals concerned.
- The karma theory states there is a universal divine agency dispensing justice. This is different from God's injunction in the Abrahamic religions imploring humans to enforce God's commandments. Hindu rulers were unconcerned about individuals' spiritual compliance or transgressions, and their jurisdiction of law was limited only to worldly matters. The focus was on oneself and not on harvesting souls of others in

the service of religious zeal. Hence, there were no Hindu world conquerors using religion as their basis to colonize.

- Finally, what the *Dharmashastras* state does not match the anthropological evidence on what people practice. The latter describes the ground reality based on all kinds of empirical evidence including Indian and foreign records. This suggests that the texts were descriptive, rather than prescriptive, in the way society perceived them. Leaving justice to be meted out by the cosmos, the approach has thus not been prescriptive.

Because there is no normative institutionalized ‘law’ on these matters, many textual statements are opposed by other textual statements. For every practice followed by one, there are different practices followed by others. Questions about society often have answers that are *both* ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

Hence, there was no such thing as a uniform ‘caste system’ through the ages or across India’s vast diversity of geography and communities. Because Indian society is frequently seen through the lens of a single ‘caste’ system, it presents contradictions. The term ‘caste system’ is misleading too because it suggests a framework that can be applied consistently and universally.

Like many other facets of Indian civilization, jatis were more like an open architecture of social organization in which communities of many kinds existed, adapted, digested others or became digested by others, and in many cases, disappeared.

Because the West prefers simple frameworks, such a nuanced understanding of jati is considered too chaotic and complex, and this is the crux of the problem of scholarship on this subject. However, the following general statements can be made about the nature of Indian society over time:

- In terms of the dignity, prosperity, and vibrancy of social life of the masses, there were good periods and bad periods,

good regions and bad regions, good examples and bad examples.

- Overall, compared to the *prevailing* practices in the Western world at any point in time, Indian society was highly advanced, mobile, flexible, and prosperous, and far from being backward or oppressive as commonly stereotyped.
- There were frequent challenges to the established social norms including challenges to the foremost spiritual experts of a given period by ordinary, humble individuals. Many homegrown social reform movements brought about major changes. This evolution required no foreign or external intervention of any kind.

Chapter 3

A Brief Social History

Seven Historical Phases

We have organized Indian social history into the following seven periods, proposed as a loose, informal chronology for the purpose of discussion.

1. Early Vedic
2. Late Vedic and *Itihasic*
3. *Dharmashastras* (overlapping with 2)
4. Muslim rule
5. European colonial rule
6. Post-Independence
7. Globalization

These periods are not defined by any precise characteristics or timeframes, nor are they mutually exclusive. They partially overlap and each contains some attributes of the others. The central characterizations that follow are purely illustrative and not meant to give a reductionist picture of a uniform system at any point.

Let us take a brief look at each of the seven periods to understand and appreciate the transformations that happened in the organization of Indian society through its history.

During the early *Rig Veda* period we come across artisans, farmers, priests, and warriors. Society was basically egalitarian. *We do not have evidence of a deep-seated, institutionalized, and hierarchical classification of people.* Women and Shudras were also composing Vedic hymns and other seminal works.¹

Even during the later Vedic and *Itihasic* period, the idea of varna was in its nascent form and not rigidly dependent on birth. Artisans such as metalworkers, chariot-makers and carpenters were not necessarily birth-based occupational jatis. The *Mahabharata* states that

one does not become a Brahmin by birth alone but also by conduct. It declares that a Brahmin could be born of a Kshatriya or a Vaishya mother.² There was also some ambiguity regarding the relative position of the varnas and these were related to each other in a fluid way.

The Greek traveler, Megasthenes, who came to India during the time of Emperor Chandragupta Maurya (reign c. 321-297 bce), affirmed that slavery was unknown in India, that no Indian slave existed, and that all Indians were free.³ Greek writers refer to the Shudras as Sodrai and describe them as an important community of northwest India at the time of the Macedonian king, Alexander (326 bce).⁴ This is contrary to the view presented by modern scholars that Shudras and Dalits have been slaves since Vedic times.

Jati was largely ignored in ancient texts and appears to be a later phenomenon. Initially, jati generally meant a kinship group whose people followed the same occupation and a shared lifestyle. This jati structure within the varna system seems to have evolved a few centuries before the Common Era.⁵ Only later did these structures become more formalized.

The *Manusmriti* explains that jatis originated due to intermarriage between different varnas. This shows that different varnas *did* intermarry. Thus, sixty-one jatis are mentioned in the *Manusmriti* and more than one hundred are mentioned in the *Brahmavaivarta Purana*.⁶ Kautilya, (more commonly known as the philosopher Chanakya) author of the celebrated *Arthashastra*, also refers to at least fifteen jatis which were the result of marriages between different varnas. During the post Maurya period (187 bce-320 ce) there were intermarriages between different varnas, and jatis were giving birth to newer jatis.

The origin of some jatis can also be due to the physical movement of communities. Such migrations allowed people to redefine themselves by combining their previous identity and their new profession. Their varna might change in this relocation. There are numerous examples of such migrant groups all over India. For

instance, among the Brahmins such migrations led to numerous jatis like Vadamas, Andhra Dravidas, and Mulukanadu in the south. A group of Brahmins from Saurashtra in the west, became artisans in Madurai in the south and call themselves the 'Saurashtra jati', but this has not been accepted by Tamil Brahmins. The Kongu Gauda (Vellala) jati of Tamil Nadu are migrants from Bengal in the east.

The theory of *apad-dharma* (dharma in times of distress) in the *Dharmashastras* reveals a gap between theory and practice in the prescribed vocations of the varnas. One finds evidence that the textual prescriptions of different professions for the four varnas were often not followed in practice.

Thus, the *Manusmriti* mentions that in times of distress, people switched from their traditional occupations to that of other varnas and jatis. It was documented that people changed their professions to suit their needs. Buddhist texts also narrate that a jati was not rigidly tied to a particular profession. We find examples of a Kshatriya warrior working successively or concurrently as a potter, a basket-maker, a reed-worker, a garland-maker; and a Vaishya cook working as a tailor or potter, without any social pushback or loss of prestige.⁷ Jatis proliferated further in Gupta- (fourth century ce-late sixth century ce) and post-Gupta times. It is also notable that Shudras had far more internal divisions among their jatis than did the other varnas.

Some medieval inscriptions indicate that very few donors that set up various endowments described themselves in terms of their varna or jati. Instead, the inscriptions provide only their names and those of their parents. This is because varna and jati were not the most important aspects of one's identity in that period.⁸

Things changed dramatically with the Muslim invasions. The Muslim period is characterized by the decline of towns, trade, and agriculture. The progress of the Indian masses was stifled, and they became helpless, immobile, and poor. This environment of despair was not conducive to either economic enterprise, trade, or industrial growth. At times, agriculture too could barely sustain itself. The best

hope for many people was to just survive. The jatis were less enterprising and resorted to ossifying their hereditary occupations and to endogamy.

The Mughal rulers exploited the masses ruthlessly and this created economic inequalities. During Shah Jahan's reign, from 1628-58, 37 percent of the entire assessed revenue collected was assigned to 68 princes and emirs, and a further 25 percent to the next 587 officers. This means as much as 62 percent of the total revenue of the empire was given to just 655 individuals. The distribution of income became even more inequitable during Akbar's reign (1556-1605), when the top twenty-five individuals took over thirty percent of the total revenue.⁹

The ostentatious lifestyle and the monuments built during the Mughal period were based on aggression and pillage, not on new investment or education or infrastructure development. They had taken over one of the world's wealthiest economies and lived the good life for a few centuries. Meanwhile, Europe had been in its 'dark ages' as a backward region of the world, but it suddenly accelerated ahead of everyone else.

The Mughals seized nearly all the surplus wealth by extortion, taxation, or direct confiscation. A stupendous amount of wealth was turned into unproductive luxuries for a few elites. This resulted in frequent and catastrophic famines.¹⁰ Such factors hampered economic dynamism. Artisans and traders lost mobility. Occupations became hereditary. The jati system became more rigid in matters of marriage and sharing food and disintegrated into opportunism and social stratification. There is considerable evidence that in the Muslim period, jati groups became defensive for survival and there was a collapse in social mobility.

By the time the Portuguese came to India in the sixteenth century, they found the society (both Hindu and Muslim) to be organized into various occupational jatis. They called them *casta*, meaning tribe, clan, or race. There is no precise equivalent for the word 'caste' in any

Indian language. Gradually, the term 'caste' became accepted as equivalent to jatis. During British rule, jatis got re-characterized as the formal 'caste system'.

Even during the colonial period, Indians had complex and multiple identities. Depending on the situation, one or another identity could take prominence. Therefore, when colonial censuses attempted to ascertain caste affiliations, the responses ranged from names designating endogamous groups, to occupations, titles, and surnames. There was no single category that people universally claimed affiliation to, which corresponded to the Western framework of 'caste'.

British census officials have documented their frustration that many Indians did not seem to know their caste, and in many instances, had to be coached for the census forms. The colonial classification system assumed that castes were well-defined standard entities whose members could be enumerated, and characteristics clearly specified. Large volumes of data were accumulated through such censuses, and this needed to be put into meaningful templates. Colonial officers deliberated among themselves and considered different approaches to resolve this paradox. This system of tagging helped them 'herd' these groups to submission during their regime. They also deliberately tagged certain jatis 'criminal' and enforced genocide against them.

All modern sociological studies on caste use these arbitrary colonial conceptualizations. After India's Independence, the democratic system turned castes into vote banks which have been manipulated by politicians ever since to serve their vested interests.

In the present age of globalization, things are once again taking a different turn. Today, when food or any product gets delivered, nobody knows, or bothers to know, what the person's caste or sexual orientation is. The free exchange of goods and services is driven by market competition and meritocracy, and nobody cares about the old social classifications. Regardless of one's birth-based factors, one can work, get paid, advance in one's career, and move socially with freedom. Efficiency and optimization are the key success factors

overriding everything else.

Capitalism is making caste obsolete, but it does not free society from structural biases. The new dynamics brings challenges as well as opportunities. The only caste system left in the rapidly urbanizing India is the one enforced by the government's formal caste identities given to people. This is India's curse: the birth-defect enshrined in its Constitution. This is fodder for the toxic identity politics.

The chronological sequence of the evolution of Hindu social structure can be represented as follows: Varna \Rightarrow Jati \Rightarrow Caste \Rightarrow Political Vote Bank \Rightarrow Global Caste Wars. The figure that follows shows the evolutionary history of Indian social structures.

The metaverse technological project goes even further by making many assets virtual and devaluing their physicality. The question is whether a whole new kind of 'Metaverse Caste System' will emerge on a global scale, and what its characteristics might be.

The table that follows organizes the trends into the seven periods that are illustrative of the way varna turned into jati, jati into caste, and now into vote banks.

The table summarizes our discussion and lists the various characteristics of varna, jati, and caste across the history of India. (The absence of hierarchy in the early periods needs to be qualified. There was in fact a hierarchy in the specific context of performing rituals, though not in the broader social sense.) It shows that varna, jati, and caste is presently mistaken and equated with each other, resulting in confusion. We will further elaborate the key points in the table.

What the Ancient Texts State

We shall now examine the major ancient texts as sources of evidence.

The Vedic Era

The earliest reference to the four varnas appears in two verses of *Purusha Sukta* of the *Rig Veda*. It mentions four social groups: Brahmin, Rajanya (instead of Kshatriya), Vaishya, and Shudra, but the term varna is not mentioned. The following two verses have created a huge controversy because they are commonly used to claim that the *Vedas* discriminate against the Shudras by equating them with the feet of the cosmic person.

When (gods) divided Purusha, into how many parts did they cut him up? What was his mouth? What arms (had he)? What (two objects) are said (to have been) his thighs and feet?

The Brahmana was his mouth; the rajah (king or kshatriya) was made his arms; the being called the vaishya was his thighs; the Shudra sprang from his feet.¹¹

B.R. Ambedkar and many other scholars considered these verses to be a later interpolation. Along these lines, the renowned social scientist, R.S. Sharma, wrote:

It is evident then that the shudras appear as a social class only towards the end of the period of Atharva Veda [chronologically the last of the Vedas], when the *Purusha Sukta* version of their origin may have been

Regardless of their timing, these verses do not support a birth-based and hierarchical system. Rather, they present a metaphor for society as an organic whole in the same way as a unified person with several parts. The purpose is to bring out the psychological inter-relationships and dependencies among different aspects that comprise an integral unity. There is interdependency like in the case of various organs of the body. A healthy body would not have conflict among its organs or some sort of exploitative hierarchy of oppressor/oppressed. And the various organs in a body are integrally unified with a common structure, namely the DNA.

No person would want his feet compromised just because their physical location is 'low'. Being low physically does not correspond to having lesser importance. Moreover, the cosmic person is often depicted lying down horizontally, in which case there is no 'upper' or 'lower'.

The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* explicitly uses the human body as a metaphor to explain the different seasons, clearly not intending to classify some seasons as 'low and inferior' relative to others. It also describes the cosmos using different parts of a body to represent the constellations, clouds, sand, rivers, mountains, trees, and plants.¹³ The body has been used in ancient texts in creative ways as a metaphor for an organic unity of diverse elements.

Furthermore, there is nothing *prescriptive* in these verses. They merely indicate how the various organs of society specialize in their respective roles. Such symbolism was commonly used to explain diversity built into the unity. Unfortunately, Western scholars obsessed with depicting Hindu society as an oppressive hierarchy claim that because the Shudras were seen as analogous to the feet, they were treated as being inferior to the rest.

Prof. Arvind Sharma of McGill University has offered yet another

interpretation of these verses: Everyone is being inspired to master diverse areas of competence and bring them together. This means the individual should be able to perform various duties across the spectrum: physical and mental tasks, management or governance of the community including offering military service when required, business activity, and other professional work. He writes: ‘The idea is that all varnas are contained in every individual, instead of every individual being comprised within one of the varnas’.¹⁴ We could extend this to society and say: Just as *Purusha*, the cosmic person, integrates multiple specializations, so also our society must harmonize and optimize all faculties.

The bottom line is that the *Rig Veda* emphasizes the equality of all human beings: ‘No one is superior, none is inferior. All are brothers marching forward to prosperity’.¹⁵

The Upanishads

The metaphysics of the *Upanishads* emphasizes the ultimate unity of all humans, living entities, and indeed, all existence.

Furthermore, the *Upanishad* titled *Vajrasuchika* focuses entirely on refuting birth-based social identity. It is concise, comprising only nine short paragraphs, and S. Radhakrishnan included it in his book, *The Principal Upanishads*.¹⁶ After giving direct point-by-point statements based on *Advaita Vedanta*, it calls upon everyone to meditate on the Supreme, removing all distinctions and egoism from the mind. The *Vajrasuchika* leaves no doubt that social discrimination is antithetical to the worldview of the *Upanishads*.

The Bhagavad Gita

The *Gita* is far more relevant and far more influential among Hindus than the *Dharmashastras*. Wherever there is disagreement between the *Dharmashastras* and the *Gita*, the latter gets predominance. Let us examine the *Gita*’s stand on varna.

The *Gita* is clear that varna is not birth-based. The key quotation is where Krishna says: ‘The four varnas were created by me on the basis of individual character and occupation.’ (*Gita* 4.13) Krishna says

explicitly that they were created on the basis of *guna* (natural aptitude, character) and karma. There is no reference whatsoever to birth as the basis for the fourfold division of varnas.

In the *Mahabharata* war, some individuals not born as Kshatriyas also participated in that role based on their *svabhava* (individual nature). Krishna enlightens Arjuna, the Pandava, to follow his *svadharma*, meaning that one must follow one's own aptitude and qualities. This is a way to optimize the resource utilization in the best interests of society.

The *Gita* explains the Vedanta principle that there is divinity in every creature. Krishna says: 'He who sees Me in all things and sees all things in Me, never becomes departed from Me. Nor am I lost to him'. (*Gita* 6.30) And a subsequent verse: 'He who judges pleasure and pain in others by the same standard as he applies to himself, that yogi is the highest'. (*Gita* 6.32)

In the sixteenth chapter, Krishna lists the virtues he considers important. These include non-violence, truth, compassion towards all, absence of anger and hatred, doing charity and service selflessly, forgiveness, and modesty. (*Gita* 16.1-3) None of these virtues are based on birth.

Krishna's life itself is an expression of all the varnas. He was raised in a Vaishya home with cowherds. He ruled over Dwarka as a Kshatriya. He accepted the role of Arjuna's charioteer as a Shudra and taught the *Gita* as a Brahmin.

The Mahabharata

The *Mahabharata* mentions that in *Satya Yuga* (the first and considered the most idyllic of all epochs) there was only one varna of human beings – that of the children of Vivaswata Manu.¹⁷ The *Puranas* and other Hindu scriptures also show no evidence of separate social categories in that period.

The *Mahabharata* emphasizes that character overrides birth.

High birth cannot be a certificate for a person of no character. But persons with good character can distinguish themselves irrespective of low birth. (Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva, Ch 34.41)

A shudra who is ever engaged in self-control, truth and righteousness, I regard him a brahmin. One is a twice-born by conduct alone. (Mahabharata, Vana Parva, Ch 216.14-15)

In a dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna, when Arjuna specifically asks how varna is determined, Krishna replies: 'Birth is not the cause, my friend; it is virtues, which are the cause of welfare. Even a Chandala (untouchable) observing the vow is considered a Brahmana by the gods.'¹⁸

The well-known story of Karna being prohibited from participating in an act for being the son of a charioteer shows that a sense of jati connected to varna did exist in that society. However, what is more interesting is that he is offered the throne of a kingdom thereby causing a change in his varna which was also possible in the flexible framework.

Dipankar Gupta, the sociologist writes:

It was well after the Vedic period, after even the period of the Mauryan empire, that the notion of untouchability came into being. In Satapatha Brahmana, the chief is advised to eat from the same vessel as the commoner. In the Rg Veda there is no mention of untouchable either. It was only around second century ad that the stratum of untouchables and the notion of untouchability became evident for instance in

B.R. Ambedkar speculates on the origin of bias against the Shudras. He says that some Brahmins felt insulted and harassed by the Shudra kings (in medieval times) and as revenge they stopped performing *upanayana* or the sacred thread ceremony ritual. That is when the Shudras became the fourth varna because their ritual privileges were denied.²⁰ Another theory he proposes is that untouchability started under Buddhist influence when Hindus gave up sacrifice of animals and beef-eating, and those Hindus who continued to eat beef were regarded as untouchables.²¹

Regardless of their stance on this thesis, most scholars do agree that birth-based varna came after the Vedic period and untouchability came after Buddhism.

Arvind Sharma also cites that many *rishis* were born as non-Brahmins. He gives the examples of Valmiki (author of the *Ramayana*) and Vyasa (author of the *Mahabharata*, and editor/compiler of the *Vedas*) and even the great sage, Vasishta. They were all born in the lowest strata. Kalidasa, respected as the greatest Sanskrit poet came from a humble and obscure origin.²²

The Dharmashastras

The *Dharmashastras* are often portrayed as supporting the caste system and abuses of all kinds. But these texts were never considered an absolute dogma like the Bible or the Quran. There was never any kind of blasphemy preventing people from rejecting any one or more *Dharmashastras* or specific verses from any text whatsoever. And as mentioned earlier, the *Dharmashastras* never had the same status as other texts like *Vedas* and *Upanishads*. Given all this, how could scholars essentialize the nature of Hinduism by referencing a few isolated verses from the *Dharmashastras* and positioning these as the inviolable 'Hindu law'. Even among the vast literature under the category of *Dharmashastras* there is no unanimity on the number and

nature of jatis, and Ambedkar himself provides counter examples.²³

Though *Manusmriti* is the text most easily used to prove the caste system in ancient India, it, too, qualifies its position: One should renounce any rule of conduct if it results in unhappiness or arouses peoples' indignation. (*Manu* 4:176) In other words, it is a self-correcting algorithm and does not claim to be absolute and frozen permanently.

More broadly, in the first verse of Chapter 2, *Manusmriti* defines dharma as follows: 'Know the true dharma as that which the wise and the good and those who are free from passion and hatred follow, and which appeals to the heart'. Gandhi often quoted this verse in his lectures. The implication, according to the *Manusmriti*, is that if the wise and the good that are free from passion and hatred reject the caste system based on birth, the system can be discarded. There is no requirement to wait for a prophet of some kind, prove himself with miracles, and then alter the teachings.

An important point often overlooked is that the *Dharmashastras* impose the heaviest restrictions on Brahmins. They are held to the highest standard and severely confined in their activities. This is in complete contrast to the common claim that the texts favored Brahmins and discriminated against Shudras. the life of a Brahmin, as per the *Dharmashastras*, was tougher and stricter. Brahmins were required to follow an austere code of conduct:

- A Brahmin was required to sustain himself by following a livelihood that caused little, or no, harm to creatures.
- He could accumulate only the minimum wealth needed for his subsistence and that too through certain activities specific to him.²⁴
- Punishments were harsher for Brahmins. In instances of theft, the liability for a Shudra was 8 times the money stolen; for a Vaishya, 16 times; for a Kshatriya, 32 times; and for a Brahmin it ranged from 64 times to 128 times. The reason

given was that a Brahmin was expected to practice his lifestyle at the highest standard.²⁵

- Brahmins were forbidden from earning money by selling meat, lac, or salt. And if a Brahmin sold milk for three days, he would become a Shudra.²⁶ Manu recommends that those Brahmins who take on the occupations of Shudras must be treated as Shudras.²⁷
- The *Dharmashastras* prohibited Brahmins and Kshatriyas from charging interest against lending.²⁸ The renowned Muslim scholar Al-Biruni who came to India in the first half of the eleventh century, writes in his work *Kitab-ul-Hind* (around 1030 ce), that usury or lending money at an interest was allowed only to a Shudra in the Indian society and forbidden to all other varnas.²⁹
- The *Dharmashastras* also stated that a Brahmin should not take a weapon into his hands even if just to examine it.³⁰
- Brahmins were told to avoid seeking praise just like one avoids poison.³¹
- A Brahmin was not allowed to expect gifts from a Shudra except under special restrictions.³²

Modern scholars falsely accuse the *Dharmashastras*, especially *Manusmriti*, of sanctioning the practice of untouchability. We point out the opposite evidence.

- The texts state that persons following certain disapproved vocations (hunting, butchery, etc.) became untouchables. These texts classify one as untouchable solely based on pursuing certain occupations. Some occupations were considered impure in the path to spiritual liberation, and there was emphasis on not coming in touch with individuals performing these impure activities. These restrictions were due to a metaphysical sense of hygiene and not the result of

hatred or any kind of ethnic prejudice.³³

- Even one's intimate friend was not to be touched for several days while the latter was in mourning because the dead body holds the *samskaras* (karmic imprints) of the deceased person.³⁴
- Untouchability also arose due to several different reasons unrelated to birth in a particular varna. Some persons became outcastes for committing grave crimes.³⁵
- Untouchability started as a way to maintain ritual purity. For instance, many families have a specific ritual passed down for centuries, in which family members are careful not to touch the one member designated in charge of a ritual till it is complete. Even the clothes worn for the ritual are washed separately and not touched by others. This could be seen as 'untouchability' even within a family due to ritualistic protocols on physical contact.

Contrary to popular belief, the *Dharmashastras* do not consider every kind of physical contact with a Shudra to be polluting. For example, the Vedic sage Atri and the deity Brihaspati, each state that there is no taint caused by any contact in temples, religious processions, marriages, sacrifices, or festivals.³⁶

Another false statement commonly made is that the varnas were always endogamous. But *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* allows marriages between Brahmins and Shudras.³⁷

Contrary to popular misconceptions, ancient Vedic texts testify that Shudras performed Vedic rituals:³⁸

- *Rig Veda* mentions five individuals from all social categories that performed rituals to Agni.³⁹
- The authors of some Vedic texts were also Shudras. For example, the author of *Aitareya Brahmana*, was a Shudra.⁴⁰
- The *Chandogya Upanishad* mentions that King Janasruti was

taught the knowledge of *prana* and *vayu* by a Shudra sage.⁴¹

- *Ramayana* mentions that the common people of Ayodhya were well-versed in the *Vedas*.
- The *Arthashastra* considers almost all indigenous communities to be Aryas, including the Shudras and most lower-class communities.⁴²
- In *Atri Samhita* the Shudra, Nishada, Chandala, and Mleccha are considered to have Brahminical origin.⁴³ The *Dharmashastras* also prescribe various *samskaras* for the Shudras, implying that they were an integral part of Hindu society.⁴⁴

The foregoing analysis of core Hindu texts indicates that modern scholarship has been unreliable and reductionist and deserves to be contested.

Chapter 4

Distortions About Caste

This section provides further historical arguments in response to the charges that caste has always been inseparable from Hinduism, and it is a scourge unique to it. Such a false view serves as the basis for activism to ‘dismantle’ Hinduism.

Hinduism's Open Architecture

It is commonly alleged that a whole assortment of Hindu taboos, restrictions, and prejudices are sanctified by its core texts and authoritarian institutions. But Hinduism is not canonical or defined by the *Dharmashastras*; the *Dharmashastras* too, as we noted, have a variety of views that are sometimes contrary to each other. Nor do the three eminent acharyas (Adi Shankaracharya, Ramanujacharya and Madhvacharya) or the multitude of popular saints and movements provide the only interpretations that all Hindus must accept.

Every text, exemplar, and social movement of Hinduism is to be respected for its contributions the same way we respect various leading scientists in history. But none of them is absolute or final.

Hinduism is an open architecture offering a vast library of texts providing guidance and therefore there are multiple choices. Every Hindu can, and does, cherry-pick his personal choices of metaphysical interpretation, of guru for guidance (or no guru), of ishta devata (special deity), of rituals, of festivals, of pilgrim centers, and of lifestyle.

From this library of choices, diverse individuals and groups emerge as system integrators to build specific systematized solutions catering to different kinds of people. There are many such turnkey 'Hindu paths', each like a start-up and public offering that may or may not succeed in the spiritual marketplace.

Caste is Not Sufficient to Be a Hindu

If caste were a sufficient condition to be a Hindu, then everyone practicing caste would be a Hindu, including caste practitioners that are Christians, Muslims, or members of other non-Hindu faiths. But the fact is that caste, and even untouchability, are very common among Indians who are non-Hindus.

Some Lingayats claim to be non-Hindus because they do not accept the *Vedas* and varna, yet practice caste and ritual gradation. Basaveshwara was a prominent leader of the Bhakti movement in Karnataka and his followers are known as Veerashaivas or Lingayats. He was vehemently against social discrimination and yet failed to prevent the caste system among his followers.¹ If caste practice automatically made a person Hindu, they should not be calling themselves non-Hindus.

Furthermore, among those untouchables whose leaders claim to be non-Hindus, there is a gradation of hierarchy and pollution. For example, *bhangis* (scavengers) are considered more polluted than *mahars* (agricultural laborers), even though both are classified as untouchables.

Buddhism and Varna

The Buddha is often presented as a social reformer against the varna system, and Buddhism is explained as a revolt of the Shudras against the hegemony of the higher varnas. However, Buddhist texts reveal a different reality. Buddha was a Kshatriya who denounced the varna system when it helped the Brahmins, but not when it helped the Kshatriyas. Buddha also was a believer in endogamy (marrying within one's varna) and commensality (eating only with people of one's varna) – at least where his own Kshatriya varna was concerned.²

The Buddhist criticism against the varna system came later in time. It was not new or radical but shared by many earlier and contemporary religious sects. A similar stress on deeds, rather than birth, was given in the enlightened and liberal sections of Vedic society. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (IV.4) says that good conduct makes a man the best Brahmin.³

Moreover, most of the intellectual stalwarts of Buddhism were themselves Brahmins. The intellectual power of the Buddhist *sangha* or monastic order was maintained by the regular admission of learned Brahmins into the Buddhist fold. From the very beginning, Brahmin adherents functioned as the pillars supporting Buddhism.⁴

Those who became serious Buddhists in the early period left their households and became monks in monasteries.⁵ When a follower of Buddha remained a householder, he did not give up the old varna identity or duty.⁶ Even according to Ambedkar, Buddhism had no separate *dhamma diksha* or preparation, for those who wanted to be initiated into the dhamma but remained householders and not become monks. This is the reason Ambedkar invented his own dhamma diksha ceremony for the laity.⁷ Therefore, in the history of Buddhism, the lay community never quite acquired the status of a separate and distinct 'Buddhist' identity.⁸ Only the Buddhist monks had a separate identity.

Scholars like P.V. Kane and S. Radhakrishnan have opined that Buddha himself did not feel he was establishing a new religion.

Many Indians find no difference between the worship of Vishnu and Buddha, or between Shiva and Avalokitesvara, or between Parvati and Tara.⁹

Muslim Castes in India

There is compelling evidence that Indian Muslims have strong caste prejudices among them. Early Muslim historians of medieval India like Minhaj-i Siraj Juzjani and Ziauddin Barani (thirteenth-fourteenth century ce) denigrated the Indian converts to Islam. Barani advocated that the sultans should employ only those persons in government service that had aristocratic backgrounds by birth. He advised that children of low caste Hindu converts to Islam should not be admitted into madrassas because this education would qualify them for government jobs.¹⁰ Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban (r. 1266-87 ce) made noble birth a prerequisite for state service and rejected candidates for official positions if they were low caste converts to Islam.¹¹

It is also notable that when Sir Syed Ahmed Khan founded the Aligarh Muslim University in 1875, it banned admission to low caste Muslims.¹²

An overwhelming majority (seventy-five percent) of the present Indian Muslim population is called Dalit Muslims. Caste and untouchability are a lived reality for Muslims in South Asia, and untouchability is the community's worst-kept secret. Many studies have claimed that concepts of 'purity and impurity'; 'clean and unclean castes' definitely exist among Muslim groups. A 2009 study found there was not one 'Dalit Muslim' leader in any of the prominent Muslim organizations, which were dominated essentially by upper caste Muslims.¹³

In another 2015 study of seven thousand Dalit Muslim households across fourteen districts in Uttar Pradesh, many testified that they are seated separately at Muslim feasts. Respondents also confirmed that they eat only after the upper caste Muslims. Many said they are served food on separate plates.¹⁴ Around eight percent reported that their children are seated in separate rows in classes and during school lunches. Similarly, at least a third of them stated that they are not allowed to bury their dead in an upper caste Muslim burial ground.

They are told to go elsewhere or are provided a corner of the main ground.¹⁵

A later section in this chapter gives Ambedkar's scathing criticism of Muslim caste abuses.

Caste and Christianity

In 2003, the late Pope John Paul II criticized caste discrimination in the Catholic Church in India when addressing the bishops of Tamil Nadu. He said: 'It is the Church's obligation to work unceasingly to change hearts, helping all people to see every human being as a child of God, a brother or sister of Christ, and therefore a member of our own family.'¹⁶ Despite his appeal, one can still see advertisements in newspapers in which Christians seek 'Catholic Brahmin' spouses.

The website Dalitchristians.com is devoted to an active movement demanding the Church to end its caste discrimination and cleanse itself of this hypocrisy. It gives extensive details on caste and untouchability among Indian Christians.

After many years of denial about caste in their community, the Church in India finally admitted to internal caste discrimination and began demanding special quotas for jobs and education for their own Christian Dalits and lower castes.

Even among Indian Christians in the US, there are separate churches for the Kerala castes and the Tamil castes.

Caste is Not Necessary to Be a Hindu

There are many Hindus that do not practice caste, and therefore it is not a *necessary condition* for being a Hindu. For instance, Hindus have settled down in Surinam, Mauritius, Bali, Fiji, and other places outside India for many generations. They are staunch Hindus, but do *not* practice caste. Many of them do not even know their caste since their ancestors left India as indentured laborers more than a century back, and they lost touch with their historical lineages. They intermarry Hindus of all kinds freely, and there are no taboos for inter-dining or sharing places of worship. (On the other hand, some diaspora jatis like Marwaris and Patels have maintained their distinct identities.)

The above facts prove: Caste is neither a necessary, nor a sufficient, condition for being a Hindu. One can be a Hindu without practicing caste; conversely, one can practice caste without being a Hindu.

Challenges to Birth-based Hierarchy in Actual Practice

Several well-known incidents show that even the highest strata of Hindus have been confronted and challenged when they exercised prejudice on grounds of birth. One example is of the eminent Adi Shankaracharya: He asked a Chandala to move out of his way; the Chandala challenged whether the acharya's behavior was consistent with his philosophy. Shankaracharya then prostrated before him as one would before a guru, reiterated his nondual philosophy, and chanted a famous set of verses. The first verse states that a person who knows the Supreme, regardless of social status, is a guru for him.¹⁷ Many important modern gurus have not been Brahmins by birth, such as Swami Vivekananda, Sri Prabhupad of ISKCON, and Swami Chinmayananda.

Because there was no central authority interpreting or enforcing any 'caste rules', such challenges and mobility were voluntary on the part of common citizens. Given this free negotiation of a community's status, the ranking of many jatis was a matter of contention. Many jatis competed in claiming their superiority over others. Some did so by observing the rules of purity or by practicing the sacred thread ceremony and certain pujas. In many instances, those considered to be Shudras thought of themselves as Kshatriyas.

The anthropologist and sociologist, M.N. Srinivasan, well-known for his work on the caste system, called this the process of Sanskritization.¹⁸ This was a means by which entire groups upgraded themselves in jati status since there was nobody to pass final judgment with any Church-like authority. Only the British made official caste laws and enforced them.

Shudras and *Vanavasis*

This section responds to several erroneous views that scholars have spread about Shudras being slaves and oppressed since the earliest Vedic times. Of course, one must fight against all abuse, but this is best achieved with an accurate diagnosis based on facts and evidence. A false diagnosis is always counter-productive and leads to incorrect solutions. This is especially true if identity politics is involved.

Shudras as Emperors, Kings, and Soldiers

What is clear is that a person's varna was not fixed permanently upon birth. Though in ancient India, occupation frequently coincided with the parents' varna, the testimony of the great epics, the Buddhist *Jataka* stories, and the lists of crafts in Hindu and Buddhist literature, also proves that a person born into a family of one varna or jati could shift to another if he was unable to follow his hereditary role or was attracted to another by inclination or talent.

As a matter of fact, we see Shudras occupying the position of kings and emperors in Vedic times.¹⁹ Some Dalit scholars claim that Shudras were the non-Aryan aboriginal race of India who were conquered and enslaved by the invading Aryan race. However, Ambedkar strongly rejects this theory. He further confirms that some of the most eminent and powerful kings of ancient India were Shudras.²⁰ The *Mahabharata* mentions a Shudra king conducting *yajnas*.²¹ And Ambedkar identifies this king with Sudas who is mentioned in the *Rig Veda*.²²

Ambedkar's view is corroborated by further historical evidence:

- The Nanda dynasty rulers of northern India in the fourth century bce were Shudras as per Hindu, Jaina, and Buddhist sources. This means Mahapadma Nanda, the great emperor of northern India, was a Shudra.
- Likewise, the next great emperor of India, Chandragupta Maurya was also a Shudra. The Maurya empire was the biggest that India ever saw, and for the first time an all-Indian nationality was achieved under a centralized government. It is important to note that a Shudra was the head of such an empire.
- Later, during the Gupta period there were Shudra kings ruling in the regions of Saurashtra, Avanti, Arbuda, and Malwa.²³
- Buddhist sources regard the powerful Pala dynasty, which

ruled Bengal and other parts of eastern India for nearly four hundred years, from the mid-eighth to the eleventh century, to be of Shudra origin. The Buddhist text *Manjushri-mulakalpa* states that Gopala, the founder of the Pala dynasty (750-1160 ce), was a Shudra.²⁴ The Pala dynasty monarchs were great patrons of Buddhism, and their copper plate inscriptions begin with an invocation to Buddha.²⁵

- In medieval India, the Kakatiya dynasty monarchs (c. 1163-1323 ce) who ruled the Telugu-speaking Andhra region claimed themselves to be Shudras in their inscriptions. One peculiarity of medieval Andhra society was that many leading warrior families made no pretensions to be Kshatriyas and instead, proudly proclaimed their Shudra status by mentioning their descent from Lord Brahma's feet. Shudras possessed the greatest degree of actual political power in medieval Andhra.

Shudra kings always regarded themselves as an integral part of Hindu society. There is no evidence in ancient India indicating that they ever considered themselves otherwise.

An important Sanskrit inscription of the Andhra chief, Prolaya Nayaka mentions a Shudra's movement to liberate a large territory from the Muslims in 1329.

Then arose chief Prolaya of the Musumuri family of Shudra caste. Unable to resist his might, the Yavanas abandoned their forts and fled to unknown places. He restored the agrahara lands to the Brahmins and revived the performance of Vedic sacrifices. He cleansed the Andhra Pradesh of the pollution caused by the movements of the Turushkas by means of the butter smoke arising out of the sacrificial fire pits.²⁶

There was another instance when Hindu rule was established in 1320 by a Mahar (Ambedkar's community) after he reconverted from Islam to Hinduism. Arvind Sharma feels this indicates the Mahars saw themselves within the Hindu fold.²⁷

It cannot be assumed that only a few fortunate Shudras became rulers while the masses led a marginalized existence. The Shudra varna played an important role in the socio-political life during Vedic and subsequent periods and enjoyed a considerable share in the governance of the state and in senior positions in the military.

- During the *Ashvamedha yajna*, the Shudras acted as armed guards protecting the horse sent out on an expedition of worldwide conquest.²⁸
- During the period 800 bce to 400 bce, Shudras found a place in the exalted body of about a dozen 'high functionaries of the state' called *ratnins*.²⁹
- The *Mahabharata* also recommends that there be a body of eight ministers to advise a king comprising four Brahmins, and three Shudras.³⁰ It also mentions that Shudras were invited to the great coronation of Yudhishtira as king of Hastinapur.³¹
- In the later medieval period, we find Shudras being commonly employed as soldiers in the mighty warrior Chhatrapati Shivaji's (r. 1674-80) army and other rulers of India. Many of them belonged to the so-called untouchable jatis like the Ramoshi, Mahars, and the Mangs.³²
- This continued in British India and the soldiers perceived it as a continuation of their earlier Kshatriya tradition.³³ Even today, the Indian Army has a Mahar Regiment that has produced two army chiefs, won several battle honors, and received the nation's highest gallantry award, the Param Vir Chakra.³⁴ Many Dalit communities presently claim Kshatriya

ancestry and often have Kshatriya names, which is verified by the Anthropological Survey of India.³⁵ There are many such examples of Dalits regarding themselves as Kshatriyas across India.³⁶

- Mahar soldiers were particularly reputed for their loyalty in military service to the Marathas and other rulers. The Hindu Peshwas also had Mahars guarding the women of the royal household.³⁷ Upon the killing of the Maratha prince Sambhaji by Mughal emperor Aurangzeb, one Sidhnak Mahar was honored by Sambhaji's son for raising an independent Mahar platoon to serve the Maratha state.³⁸

Economic Power and Social Status

Contrary to the portrayal of Shudras as perpetually helpless and poor, records show that they formed the backbone of the Vedic economy. The *Vedas* mention many kinds of technological crafts and industries associated with them.³⁹ P.V. Kane mentions sixty-two different Shudra industries which included leather work, metallurgy, and textiles, all owned, managed, and controlled by them.⁴⁰ In other words, they were self-employed and not laborers.

The Shudra artisans and craftsmen were imparted training in big educational institutions and the *Vedas* clearly state that the king's duty is to build such institutions.⁴¹ Many mantras of the *Rig Veda* state that the king should also protect and help the craftsmen and artisans, and these were Shudra communities.⁴²

It was not unusual for Brahmins and Kshatriyas to work under Shudras.⁴³ Many Ayurvedic physicians and Sanskrit scholars in Kerala belonged to the Shudra Ezhava community.⁴⁴ For instance, Itty Achudan was a distinguished Ezhava herbalist of the second half of the seventeenth century, whose statement appears in the beginning of the renowned book *Hortus Malabaricus*. This botanical treatise on the medicinal properties of plants is considered one of the earliest sources of Europeans' knowledge of botany. It was published in twelve volumes from Amsterdam between 1678 and 1703.⁴⁵

In ancient times, the Shudras and Vaishyas that worked together in the same economic fields were jointly called Sudraryau.⁴⁶ Numerous inscriptions show that these guilds also functioned like banks, receiving deposits from the public for interest and lending money to borrowers.⁴⁷

The lawgiver Medhatithi's commentary on *Manusmriti* says that Shudras teach grammar and other sciences, a fact also mentioned in the *Brihaddharma Purana*.⁴⁸ The *Apastambha Dharmasutra* states that *vidya* or knowledge that exists traditionally among the women and Shudras is a supplement of the *Atharva Veda*.⁴⁹

Ancient texts like *Yajnavalkya Smriti*, *Narada Smriti* and *Vishnu Smriti* prove that Shudra guilds of artisans and craftsmen were part of the state machinery and were held in high regard.⁵⁰ These guilds also formed part of the judicial tribunals of the country. The *Gautam Dharmashastra* mentions they had the right to make their own laws which were respected by the king.⁵¹ Throughout recorded history, these guilds are shown to have worthy social positions.⁵² In fact, the Shudra guilds enjoyed considerable economic prosperity in ancient India.⁵³

The guild system functioned in the north till as late as the twelfth century, after which Muslim invasions made the guilds immobile and ossified, resulting in their degeneration and subdivision.⁵⁴

Being part of the wealthy class of the times, they also made large donations. The evidence lies in numerous inscriptions that mention Shudras as philanthropists.⁵⁵ The Jain *Agamas* dated around the sixth to third century that comprise Mahavira's teachings, provide a picture of the economic prosperity of Shudras and the social respect for them.⁵⁶ Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese traveler who visited India in the latter half of the seventh century, mentions Shudras as a class of agriculturists.⁵⁷

The following figure shows the multifaceted role played by the Shudras in the traditional Indian society.

Untouchability Between Shudras

It is generally believed that untouchability was practiced only by the higher varnas as a form of oppression against the Shudras and Dalits. However, untouchability was also present among the latter communities, and this persisted even after they converted to Christianity or Islam. There is evidence that by the beginning of the Common Era, the outcastes themselves had developed a caste hierarchy and had their own untouchables. Even much earlier, Manu mentions that the *antyavasayin*, one born of a mixed marriage between a chandala and a *nishada*, (also a low caste) was despised even by the chandalas.⁵⁸ In a similar manner, nearly every untouchable group felt that another group was lower than theirs.⁵⁹

Even in present times, Scheduled Castes in every region have a hierarchy that restricts the acceptance and exchange of water and fruit from certain communities. For example, in south India, a Mala considers a Madiga an untouchable, and for both, a Thoti is an untouchable.⁶⁰ Similarly in north India, for a Meghwal, a Regar is an untouchable, and for both, a Bhangi is an untouchable.⁶¹ Likewise, the Adi Dravida do not accept food and water from the Dhobi, Mala and Madiga communities.⁶² Ironically, many Scheduled Castes (ninety-six percent) currently are endogamous.⁶³

Indigenous Education Before the British

Some scholars presently allege that Shudras were not given an opportunity to become educated. According to these theories, Shudras were steeped in illiteracy due to this discrimination. It is widely assumed that education in India, whether in the ancient period or up until British rule, was the privilege of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. This view maintains that Shudras became emancipated only when the British introduced English education in India and provided them equal opportunities. However, the truth, is the exact opposite.

The scholar Dharampal, considered one of Gandhi's most earnest followers, spent considerable time in England studying their official records on India. His goal was to bring back an archive on the state of pre-colonial indigenous Indian education as per official British records. His books are a great reference source that refute many false claims made by eminent historians.

Dharampal writes:

Madras Presidency and Bengal-Bihar data presents a kind of revelation. The data reveals the background of the teachers and the taught. It ... is in sharp contrast to the various scholarly pronouncements of the past 100 years or more, in which it had been assumed that education of any sort in India, till very recent decades, was mostly limited to the twice-born amongst the Hindoos, and amongst the Muslims to those from the ruling elite. The actual situation which is revealed was different, if not quite contrary, for at least amongst the Hindoos, in the districts of the Madras Presidency (and dramatically so in the Tamil speaking areas) as well as the two districts of Bihar. It was the groups termed Soodras, and the castes considered below them who

predominated in the thousands of the then still-existing schools in practically each of these areas.⁶⁴

In other words, Shudras and other lowest social strata communities had good access to traditional Indian education. Dharampal presents precise statistics using the British surveys on the indigenous education system of India. The table that follows summarizes his findings of Madras Presidency in 1825.

Source: Dharampal, The Beautiful Tree

Clearly, the percentage of Shudras in schools (66.59) is higher than that of all the other varnas combined.

Similarly, Dharampal states that in the Malayalam-speaking Malabar, Shudras and other such castes accounted for some fifty-four percent of school-going students.⁶⁵ In the largely Kannada-speaking Bellary, the proportion of Brahmin and Vaishya students was thirty-three percent, while Shudras and the other lower strata accounted for sixty-three percent of school-going students.⁶⁶ The position in the Oriya-speaking Ganjam was similar: Brahmins and Vaishyas accounted for 35.6 percent of the students, and the lower strata around 63.5 percent.⁶⁷ The table that follows shows the varna breakdown percentage of students in indigenous schools in the various regions of Madras Presidency.

This trend was not just confined to primary school education. According to Madras Presidency surveys, those practicing medicine and surgery belonged to a variety of castes. Amongst them, according to British medical officials, the barber jati were the best surgeons.⁶⁸ Astronomy was another subject in which the majority of students were Shudras.

The findings of Dharampal are supported by the fact that the British administrator Thomas Munro, in his survey of indigenous Indian education in Madras Presidency in 1822, explicitly stated that *there is no indication that a Shudra status prevented children from instruction in*

*vernacular schools.*⁶⁹

Source: Dharampal, The Beautiful Tree

Shudras not only dominated as students but also formed a large section of teachers. The Britisher, William Ward, in his early nineteenth century account of indigenous schools in Bengal, states that *teachers in schools were generally Shudras and occasionally Brahmins.*⁷⁰

Dalit Hindu Pride

Some modern scholars claim that Shudras and Dalits are not Hindus. This serves the agenda to divide and fragment society. However, if we look at the various population census reports and comprehensive surveys carried out by the Indian government, it becomes clear that an overwhelming majority of Shudras and Dalits proudly classify themselves as Hindus.

A reliable reference is the study the Anthropological Survey of India carried out under its massive *People of India* project (1985-92). The intention was to present the anthropological profile of all the communities of India. The report reveals several interesting facts:

- 96.9 percent of the SC communities identified themselves as Hindus.⁷¹
- 79.8 percent of the SC communities share water resources and 67 percent share crematoria with other communities.
- 91 percent of them visit the same religious shrines as other communities.
- 91 percent of the SC communities participate in traditional Hindu festivals and festivities, and 17.6 percent have a special role to play in these festivals.⁷²

Furthermore, Ambedkar specifically argued using the physical anthropological data, that there was no ethnic difference between Mahars and some of the Brahmin groups in Maharashtra and the Chamars and Brahmins in Uttar Pradesh.⁷³

Many investigators have also reported that the genetic differences between the geographical regions are greater than the variations between the castes within a given region.⁷⁴

There is hard evidence on the religious lives of the three largest Dalit or SC communities in India – the Chamar, the Adi Dravida, and the Pasi. It clearly shows that they have considered themselves Hindus.

The Chamars are the largest Scheduled Caste or Dalit community in India and are spread out in almost all the northern states.⁷⁵ In Uttar Pradesh they are known as Raidasis because they recognize themselves as spiritual descendants of the Hindu Vaishnava saint, Raidas.⁷⁶ In Punjab and Himachal Pradesh their marriages are performed according to Vedic tradition,⁷⁷ and besides Raidas, they worship Hindu deities. In Haryana, too, the followers of Ravidas called Jatavs⁷⁸ as well as the followers of Sant Kabir called Julaha,⁷⁹ worship Lakshmi and Kali, amongst others. They employ Brahmins to perform their birth, marriage, and death rituals. Durga puja and Holi are their major festivals.⁸⁰

The Adi Dravida is the second largest SC community in India.⁸¹ They identify themselves as Hindus, visit Hindu shrines, and celebrate Hindu festivals.⁸² In Karnataka, they worship Hindu deities like Durgamma, Renuka, Parashuram, Laxmi, Venkataramana, and so forth.⁸³ In Andhra Pradesh, they profess Hinduism and celebrate festivals like Diwali, Dussehra, Ganesh Chaturthi, Pongal and so on.⁸⁴

The third-largest SC or Dalit community in India, the Pasi, believe in the legend that they arose from the sweat (*pasina* in Hindi, hence their name Pasi) of Sage Parashuram to protect cows from being killed.⁸⁵ They are spread in many northern states and worship Hanuman, Devi and other deities,⁸⁶ and perform pilgrimages to sacred Hindu centers like Kashi, Prayag, Haridwar, Vrindavan, and Naimisharanya. Typically, a Brahmin officiates at their major rituals.⁸⁷ The Pasis share wells, water resources, and religious shrines with other jatis and join them in traditional festivals. The following figure provides a glimpse into the regional profile of some Dalit communities of India.

As per their own traditional accounts, until the medieval period, Pasis ruled in Avadh in Uttar Pradesh. Some of their subcastes like Rajpasis claim descent from Rajputs.⁸⁸

Another interesting fact is that there was no manual scavenging in pre-British times since there were no toilets in homes. Manual

scavenging for Dalits was a British creation, modeled after scavenging practices in London those days. Communities like Bhangi, Mehtar and other castes became associated with scavenging during British rule. They are now unitedly called the Balmiki/Valmiki and claim descent from the legendary Hindu saint Valmiki. They also identify as Hindus.⁸⁹

Vanavasis

The term Adivasi literally means original inhabitant. All Indians should be called Adivasis, but the British race theories of divide and rule classified only certain communities as indigenous and the rest as foreign invaders. The term ‘aborigines’ is also flawed as that invokes ideas of the natives of America and Australia who got subdued by foreign races; such terminology has served to treat non-Adivasis as some foreign race. The Government of India has also argued against the use of the term ‘indigenous people’ for certain people at international forums because that implies the rest of Indians are foreign.⁹⁰

We will use the term ‘*Vanavasi*’ to refer to communities that are traditionally forest-dwelling, making clear that the different geography does not correspond to a different race. However, when referring to governmental sources of data we will retain the official term ‘Scheduled Tribe’ to avoid confusion.

As in the case of the Dalits, there are many modern-day claims that Vanavasis were always non-Hindus. However, a British superintendent of census from 1931 said that in his provinces the Vanavasis followed Hindu customs, participated in Hindu processions, and worshipped Hindu deities. He mentioned that often it was impossible to distinguish them from other Hindus and they referred to themselves as Hindus.⁹¹

More recently, according to the *People of India* project, most people belonging to the various Scheduled Tribes identified themselves as Hindus.⁹² They selected the category of Hindu as opposed to other options offered in the surveys, such as indigenous tribal religion, Christianity, Islam, etc. In the 1981 census, 87.05 percent of the total Scheduled Tribe population classified themselves as Hindus.⁹³

The four largest Vanavasi communities in India are the Gond, the Bhil, the Santhal, and the Mina.⁹⁴

Gond is numerically the largest Scheduled Tribe of India covering a

vast geography across several states in central India.⁹⁵ They were once politically powerful and in the medieval period ruled over as many as four separate kingdoms.⁹⁶ According to their legends, their ancestors were adopted and nurtured by Lord Shiva and Mother Parvati. They worship Hindu deities and celebrate all major Hindu festivals like Holi, Diwali, Dussehra, Rakshabandhan, and Sankranti.⁹⁷

The second largest Scheduled Tribe of India is the Bhil community, spread out in southern Rajasthan, western Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and northern Maharashtra. They speak Bhili which belongs to the family of Sanskrit. They are the largest Vanavasi community in Gujarat. Nearly all the Bhils identify themselves as Hindus and celebrate festivals like Holi, Diwali, Navaratri, Rakshabandhan, etc. Historically, the Bhils played an important role in the coronation ceremony of many Rajput chiefs.⁹⁸

Mina is the largest Scheduled Tribe of Rajasthan and the fourth largest in India.⁹⁹ They trace their descent from the *Min-avatara* or the fish incarnation of Vishnu, hence the name Mina.¹⁰⁰ Lord Shiva is their supreme deity, and they also worship Hanuman, Sita-Ram and Radha-Krishna.¹⁰¹ In the 1961 and 1971 censuses, one hundred percent of Minas recorded themselves as Hindus.¹⁰²

Like the Shudras, many Vanavasi communities have played a significant role in Hindu society as technologists and engineers. For example, the Agaria tribe (name derived from *aag* or fire) in Madhya Pradesh were traditionally ironsmiths and experts in smelting iron and making iron objects.¹⁰³

People from the Munda community inhabit central and northeastern states.¹⁰⁴ The freedom fighter, Birsa Munda, who fought against British rule belonged to this community. He was influenced by a Brahmin whom he regarded as his guru. He learnt the Hindu epics and was inspired by their legendary heroes.¹⁰⁵ He became a vegetarian when he met a Vaishnava saint who taught him Bhakti.¹⁰⁶ Birsa Munda also raised his voice against Christian missionaries and the oppression of landlords and British administrators.¹⁰⁷

It is noteworthy that despite the aggressive conversion drives by Christian missionaries over a long period, many Scheduled Tribes of northeast India overwhelmingly report themselves as Hindus. For example, among the Bodo-Kachari, which is the largest tribe of the Brahmaputra valley in Assam, ninety-five percent have reported themselves as Hindus in the 1971 census. They also visit the sacred shrines of the Vaishnav monasteries and temples.¹⁰⁸

The Kachari Hojai Scheduled Tribe of Assam belongs to the Bodo linguistic group that observes major Hindu rituals like naming a child and the sacred thread ceremony. They belong to the Shakta tradition and claim to be Kshatriya. The 1971 census recorded one hundred percent of Hojais as followers of Hinduism. Another Bodo community is Kachari Barman and according to the 1961 and 1971 censuses, all of them classified themselves as Hindus.¹⁰⁹

Interestingly, many Vanavasi communities claim Kshatriya ancestry.¹¹⁰

The Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement was the most prominent within the framework of Hinduism to fight against jati hierarchies and divisiveness. Across India it was led by several saint poets born in the so-called lower jatis and included female saints.

Bhakti (loosely translated as devotion) has always been a part of Hinduism. The *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, and the *Puranas* all comprise teachings of Bhakti. This old tradition was revived in a big way in Tamil Nadu in the sixth century ce by Shaiva and Vaishnava saints. In Karnataka in the twelfth century, it raised its voice against claims of jati exclusivity, to the extent of getting a Brahmin's daughter married to an untouchable's son.

The Bhakti movement democratized Hinduism into a grassroots movement. Its adherents emphasized that outward book knowledge is neither necessary nor sufficient for spiritual enlightenment. This effectively undermined the authority of anyone claiming exclusive access to the *Vedas*, because now the *Vedas* were not the only path available. However, it would be incorrect to say that Bhakti revolted against the *Vedas*; the fact is that its teachings are Vedic. In fact, many important Bhakti saints wrote commentaries on the *Vedic* texts and advocated studying them.¹¹¹

The Bhakti movement was diverse and spread all over India. Kabir in north India, Shishunala Sharif in Karnataka, and Shirdi Sai Baba in Maharashtra were all born Muslim, but were Bhakti saints highly revered by Hindus. Maharashtra's Bhakti movement was similar, drawing from the lower caste working class as well as Brahmins.

Contrary to some modern claims that Shudras never considered themselves Hindus, there were many influential Bhakti saints from Shudra backgrounds. We will look at some prominent examples.

Ravidas and Kabir in the North

Swami Ramanandacharya was an imposing Vaishnava saint, a Brahmin by birth, who propagated the path of Rama bhakti in north India. He had twelve chief disciples, many of them Shudras like Sant Ravidas, Sant Kabir and Sant Sain.¹¹²

Ravidas traveled throughout north India to spread Bhakti and wrote profound hymns devoted to Vishnu. Ravidas' fame spread far and wide. Meerabai, the sixteenth-century celebrated woman, mentions meeting him in Kashi and acknowledges him to be her guru.¹¹³ Sant Ravidas, in many of his devotional songs says that though he belongs to the Chamar jati of Shudras, the Brahmins of Varanasi prostrate before him with great respect.¹¹⁴

The fifteenth-century poet and saint, Kabir, was another influential disciple of Ramanandacharya. He was born in Varanasi to a family of weavers from the Shudra community.¹¹⁵ He is among the most renowned of Bhakti poets and has a large following among the masses. His *dohas*, or two-line poems have a spirit of total surrender to Vishnu whom he calls Rama or Hari and are popularly recited by all sections of Indian society regardless of their varna or jati.

Hindu Saints of Maharashtra

Chokhamela, saint poet of Maharashtra's Varkari sect (late thirteenth and early fourteenth century) mentions in his works that he belonged to the Mahar jati, often classified as the lowest of the low.¹¹⁶ He composed several devotional songs praising Vishnu and the *Vedas*. Other saints of his sect like Namdev, Tukaram, Gora Kumbhar, Savanta Mali also belonged to the lower jatis.¹¹⁷

The Vari pilgrimage is a living tradition of Maharashtra in which devotees march on foot chanting a mantra inspired by the names of two leading saints of the Varkari tradition – Jnaneshvar, a Brahmin, and Tukaram, a Shudra. This illustrates the unity of Brahmins and Shudras in this tradition. Tukaram was a firm believer in the Vedic tradition, and one of his songs says that one should not even look at a person who disbelieves the *Vedas* and *Puranas*.¹¹⁸

Hindu Shudra Saints from the South

The sixty-three Tamil Saiva saints called Nayanmars belonged to all varnas, including Shudras. Similarly, among the twelve Tamil Vaishnava Alvar saints, some were Shudras.

Among the large-scale social movements integrating Dalits into mainstream society, the Ezhavas in Kerala and the Nadars in Tamil Nadu were prominent. Both achieved their social transformations within the Hindu framework despite being under colonial rule.

In the case of Ezhavas, Narayana Guru was a powerful leader who upgraded their social status. When Ezhavas faced discrimination, he built and consecrated new Hindu temples where Dalits and non-Dalits prayed together.¹¹⁹ He taught the philosophy of Adi Shankaracharya calling it a sublime contribution to the world.¹²⁰ He created Vedic schools to train Dalits as priests for performing Hindu rituals and teaching Hindu philosophy. As an educationist, Narayana Guru founded secular schools and colleges for all communities and several of his important disciples were Brahmins.¹²¹

He expanded beyond the Ezhavas, bringing other Dalits into the fold, to educate them for professional careers. His was an all-encompassing program for comprehensive advancement of the Dalits that included the development of a financial credit system among them.

Narayana Guru trained his teachers to preach harmony with other castes and was supported by the upper castes. There were joint processions of all castes to call for Dalits' entry into major temples. Gandhi and he worked together to bring such reforms into the mainstream.

The Nadars did not have a charismatic leader like Narayana Guru yet managed to thrive under their own secular leaders. In their case, it was mainly through the medium of education and training in job skills. They helped each other through friendly credit arrangements and informal employment agencies, while also Sanskritizing

themselves.¹²²

The Nadars became economically powerful in industry. Modern scholars have highlighted that their community boasts some of India's richest industrialists.¹²³ Shiv Nadar, the founder of HCL Technologies, is a billionaire industrialist from this community. There are many lessons to be learned from their success. Their approach was diametrically opposite to that of Harvard University's Suraj Yengde. The goal was not to build rabble-rousing activist organizations for spreading awareness of their victimhood or protesting and making demands on the government and society.

Rather, they established constructive initiatives for their advancement. For example:

- They convinced parents to send their children to schools.
- They provided vocational training that qualified members to work outside their traditional professions.
- They helped their members relocate to places where jobs were available.
- They fought addiction in their community.
- Fellow Nadars were looked after like extended family.

This was achieved without taking an adversarial stance against the rest of society. Success came about because of working with other communities rather than attacking them.

In modern Hinduism, there have been many other movements that have helped enrich the moral fabric and spiritual life of their followers. As explained by Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and others, modern Hinduism has rejected the caste system. Likewise, for the groups led by Brahmakumaris, ISKCON, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, and Mata Amritanandamayi. They have shown that Hinduism can thrive without the caste system and needs no foreign intervention.

Chapter 5

British Social Engineering

The British Admit That No Rigid Caste Existed

Prof. Simon Charsley, anthropologist at the University of Glasgow, explains how the British struggled to frame Indian society in terms of caste even as late as the censuses from 1871 to 1901. Considering that the East India Company came into existence in the year 1600, this is the situation even after 250 years of the British presence in India. Charsley's account begins as follows:

When he [Sir Herbert Risley] became Commissioner for the 1901 Census of India, he was determined to carry out within its framework a grand experiment in classifying and ranking castes in the sub-continent as a whole. ... Census-taking had often suffered ... from the difficulty even of identifying discrete castes and foundered in some census regions over the impossibility of finding any meaningful way of classifying them that did not release a hornets' nest of contention, as the Commissioner for the 1871 Madras Census put it. Commissioners in their reports often retreated from any greater ambition than providing a list of castes in English alphabetical order. It was clear ... uniformity of classification across the country could not be hoped for. Risley's scheme, therefore, was to send to every Census Commissioner, in each province, presidency, princely state, ... a standard scheme, inviting them to set up committees of 'native gentlemen' to consider its local applicability and to propose modifications as required.¹

What this means is there was difficulty 'even of identifying discrete

castes'. There was 'the impossibility of finding any meaningful way of classifying them'. Even after a few decades of attempts to study the castes, 'a uniformity of classification across the country could not be hoped for'. This tells us that after studying India so thoroughly for over two centuries, and engaging numerous Indian kings, scholars, and other significant persons, the British were clueless about caste. Every present scholar that makes tall claims of being an expert on 'the caste system' ought to study these British accounts with some humility.²

From the outset of the census project, the British reported resistance from the Indian communities being mapped as well as from the British officials carrying out the census. A persistent challenge was in identifying clear boundaries and definitions of 'the castes' in real life. This issue is well documented in official reports from the census authorities.

The problem was that of a deep civilizational clash. The British needed simple normative definitions of castes that would be mutually exclusive and clearly demarcated. The ground reality, however, was completely different. Indian society did not work the way the British wanted to deal with it. The British Privy Council also acknowledged that a better source of 'law for Hindoos' was custom and usage in real life as opposed to what was in texts like the *Dharmashastras*.³

Dharampal, after spending many years in British libraries concluded:

For the British, caste was a great obstacle, an unmitigated evil not because they believed in castelessness or a non-hierarchical system but because it stood in their way of their breaking Indian society. ... caste did hinder the process of atomization of Indian society and made ... conquest and governance more difficult. The present fury and theoretical formulation

against the organization of Indian society into castes, whatever the justification or otherwise of caste today, thus begins with British rule.⁴

Before Lord Risley decided to force a hierarchical framework, various European thinkers were speculating different kinds of conceptual schemes to capture Indian society in their imagination and make sense of its bewildering size, diversity, and depth. For instance, W.R. Cornish, who supervised census operations in Madras Presidency in 1871, wrote: 'Whether there was ever a period in which the Hindus were composed of four classes is exceedingly doubtful'. Similarly, C.F. Magrath, who authored a report on the 1871 Bihar census, wrote that 'now meaningless division into the four castes alleged to have been made by Manu should be put aside'.⁵

The Cambridge anthropologist Susan Bayly writes:

Until well into the colonial period, much of the subcontinent was still populated by people for whom the formal distinctions of caste were of only limited importance, even in parts of the so-called Hindu heartland... The institutions and beliefs which are now often described as the elements of traditional caste were only just taking shape as recently as the early 18th Century.⁶

Different committees and commissioners established by the British came up with a wide variety of interpretations and often fell back on a simple list of castes without any hierarchy whatsoever. For example, in Baroda, the superintendent of census operations in charge said that Risley's terms were 'quite exotic' because in his province 'no such sharp distinctions are laid down here'. He took recourse to an

alphabetical listing of castes without hierarchy.⁷

Despite Risley's determination, he failed to achieve a consensus among his officials across India on a uniform classification. All schemes of classification applicable in one province of India were rejected in others. Complaints were received from experienced and knowledgeable officers, both Indian as well as European. Charsley explains: 'One census commissioner after another struggled to discern some order amongst the differently-based groups.'⁸

It is interesting to note that the census commissioner for India complained from Bengal that 'the ignorant classes have very little idea of what caste means and are prone to return either their occupation, or their sub-caste, or their clan, or else some title by which they are known to their fellow-villagers'.⁹

But gradually, by the twentieth century, with repeated censuses and persistent inquiries from strangers landing up at their doorstep on how to identify their caste, *the Indian community leaders became schooled to give suitable answers that would be acceptable to the British.*

A vast literature emerged on how one's community should be classified. Many castes considered 'low' by the census-takers argued that they were high castes. Categories were hotly contested. A key basis for claiming castes to be mutually exclusive was that they practiced endogamy, but this too was not uniformly applicable. Key factors determining who would be eligible as a marriage partner included place of origin, occupation, language, and various combinations. Nor was endogamy universal as there were many exogamous groups also, i.e., those that married outside their community. Jati boundaries were often porous with many exceptions and contexts.¹⁰

Lord Risley Imposes 'Caste = Racial Hierarchy'

Eventually, the template of Western race theory was adopted as the standard and Risley decided to forcibly fit India's diversity into it. That's how the imagined caste system emerged through trial and error over several censuses spanning half a century.

Sanjoy Chakravorty, professor of geography, urban and global studies at Temple University, Pennsylvania, summarizes the colonial agenda that is well accepted by scholars today:

The colonisers invented or constructed Indian social identities using categories of convenience during a period that covered roughly the 19th Century. This was done to serve the British Indian government's own interests - primarily to create a single society with a common law that could be easily governed. A very large, complex and regionally diverse system of faiths and social identities was simplified to a degree that probably has no parallel in world history, entirely new categories and hierarchies were created, incompatible or mismatched parts were stuffed together, new boundaries were created, and flexible boundaries hardened.¹¹

The resulting categorical system became rigid during the next century and quarter, as the made-up categories came to be associated with real rights. Religion-based electorates in British India and caste-based reservations in independent India made amorphous categories concrete. There came to be real and material consequences of belonging to one category instead of

Making 'Untouchability' Official

An important challenge for British experts was to decide whether there were four or five varnas. Besides the well-known four varna categories, Risley proposed a fifth which he defined as 'castes whose touch is so impure as to pollute even Ganges water'.¹³

But Risley's criteria, that untouchables were determined by Brahmins' unwillingness to take water from their hands, was not universally applicable. The criteria for physical segregation were much more complex. Few census managers wanted to take up Risley's suggestion for the fifth varna because applying his definition to concrete situations was very subjective, and a matter of opinion.

But gradually, this idea got traction. In Rajasthan, two British superintendents of census included the term 'untouchable' for the first time in print.¹⁴ Others, however, pointed out that in the four-varna system these groups were included as part of the Shudras and there was no such category as untouchables. Evidence from the field differed from one province to another, from one census official to the next. Both, the four- and five-varna, versions were initially adopted in different locations.

Risley then decided to solve the problem by applying a racial theory. He started

distinguishing 'tracts' according to their supposed racial composition and within which some greater uniformity might be expected. The North-West, today divided between India and Pakistan, he declared 'the Indo-Aryan Tract', consisting of the two Rajasthan census divisions, together with Punjab and Kashmir. Though the report for Punjab gave him no support and that for Kashmir rather little, he took his cue from the two Rajasthan reports and, on this slight basis, he set up for

that tract a unified classification which included a 'Class VII: Castes untouchable'. No such term could be worked into any of his other tracts. From this unpropitious start, representing as it did more of a rebuff than a successful initiative, the career of a key term in modern India was launched.¹⁵

Under this experimental approach, British officials could experiment and project their own favorite theories with no objective checks and balances. One enterprising official began applying his own categories using the racial theory prevalent at that time. He defined Brahmins as 'Predominantly Aryan or their equals'; he had a category called 'Mixed castes'; another called 'Aboriginal tribes and wandering castes'; and finally, 'Impure Castes'.¹⁶

Indian Nationalists Accept the British Categories

This matter became a topic of debate among Indian nationalists who tended to be members of the English-speaking elite. Gandhi had experienced ill-treatment of Indians in South Africa and brought this sensitivity in the treatment of low castes in India. In 1903, the educationalist and Congress leader, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, moved a resolution on the elevation of the depressed classes.

The actual term 'Untouchable' had not yet emerged in the mainstream, and the idea was being expressed as 'Depressed Classes'. In the first volumes of the *Bombay Gazetteer* published in 1877, the term 'Depressed castes' was used, but subsequent volumes from 1879-80, the word '*classes*' began to be substituted and became the term used by the Reform movement. In 1906, the Depressed Classes Mission Society of India was formed in Bombay, in 1909 in Madras, and in the north, the Arya Samaj had a similar approach. By the end of the decade, articles on the uplifting of the depressed *classes* were appearing in newspapers all over India.

This is when Sayaji Rao Gaekwad III, the maharaja of Baroda and progressive ruler of Gujarat, started making a big impact on the way communities were to be classified. He also encouraged leading activists, reformers, and writers to join the movement to uplift the depressed classes. Among these were the freedom fighter, Lala Lajpat Rai, Theosophist leader, Annie Besant, and renowned Buddhist thinker, Anagarika Dharmapala.

The maharaja preferred the term 'untouchableness' to the term 'depressed classes'. Given his stature, his choice of term tilted the discourse. He noted that the problem 'has varied at different times as the provinces, castes and communities of India have varied'.¹⁷ Gradually, 'untouchability' replaced the maharaja's term 'untouchableness'. Under the presidency of the maharaja, the first All India Depressed Classes Conference of 1918 issued an 'All-India Anti-untouchability Manifesto'.

By the 1920s, the term was widely used in British writing, but Gandhi was hesitant. Sometimes he used 'so-called untouchables' or 'suppressed classes'. In 1931, he announced a change and decided the term 'Harijan' (man of God) was more desirable.

An important voice was Ambedkar, himself a Mahar from the Bombay Presidency, and a community to which the term 'untouchable' could certainly apply. But Mahars were once a large and widespread agricultural jati of landowners that later got reduced to landless laborers due to political upheavals. By the time he returned to India in 1924 from his legal training in the US and Britain, Ambedkar was using the term 'Untouchable'. He asserted that the Untouchables were 'a separate element in the national life of India' and became their spokesman.

Once untouchability became the identity of millions of people, there was a need to name its 'other'. At first, the term 'caste Hindu' was used, even by Ambedkar in 1930. But he later abandoned it and adopted 'Hindu' as the other, making the Untouchables non-Hindus as opposed to being out-caste Hindus. This was a major shift with huge implications.

Ambedkar argued that Untouchables were fundamentally different from Hindus, and capitalized it to emphasize a separate, and distinct, identity. As the chairman of the drafting committee for Independent India's Constitution and as first justice minister, he was responsible for firmly embedding the Untouchable identity.¹⁸ The following figure shows how untouchability became a formal category during the British period.

Scholars have identified many problems with Untouchability as a normative category, not just as a term but the category itself:

- It establishes an all-India homogeneous ethnicity when in fact each region's lowest strata of communities are distinct from one another in their histories, practices, relationships with the upper castes, and internal social-political organization. According to Charsley, the problem is that it

‘masks local heterogeneity as well as setting up a uniformity more apparent than real between areas. It simplifies the problem of understanding Indian society, at the cost of obscuring the need to come to terms with one of its major and analytically important characteristics: diversity’.¹⁹

- Even within a given region, the term subsumes several communities that have carefully preserved their separate distinctiveness. For instance, each jati within this Untouchable grouping refers to itself having a distinct first ancestor, pointing to significantly different historical sources of identity.
- There have been tensions among the different Untouchable communities. Gandhi often chided them for prejudices against each other.
- Even the concept of impurity (the defining criteria) is too complex to be reduced into this homogeneous classification.
- It forces a dichotomy of victim/oppressor upon all its members when, in fact, each community’s social narrative is distinct. It makes every such community feel like a disadvantaged people who ought to see themselves as victims and be hostile towards other jatis.

Charsley finds the category of Untouchability an artificial imposition on India’s social reality. He says:

“Untouchability” thus suppressed diversity and variation, and set up a uniform and highly simplified structure in terms of which Indian society was to be understood. The positive practical importance of this conceptual development was great, but the negativity of the characterization needs to be firmly understood before considering the positive. It is this negativity

which has become increasingly relevant to current developments as the twentieth century ends.²⁰

“Untouchability”, however, not only imposes a hiatus upon the various social, cultural and economic links and continua but ... has the effect of hiding everything positive to be found below the division created. ... “Untouchable” refers to nothing those labelled do or are, merely to what others, negatively, do to them: they are excluded. ... They are not to be viewed as artisans, farmers or traders, nor in terms of their ritual contributions, but in terms of the undefined, unclear but certainly devaluing quality of Untouchability.²¹

Under the Government of India Act 1935, the term ‘Depressed Classes’ was replaced by ‘Scheduled Castes’. It was difficult to reconcile that while the south had the phenomenon, in the north the situation was different. Many experts felt that in large parts of the country Untouchables did not form a distinct and separate group. The following figure shows how British social engineering gave birth to the modern caste system.

This is how the Scheduled Castes were invented: starting with discussions on terms, then becoming structured formally by the British censuses, and subsequently being adopted by Indian nationalists and reformers. Finally, what was initially a theoretical structure, crystalized into substance at the ground level. This was incorrectly projected backwards to define the characteristic of ancient Vedic society.

Charsley states:

Caste becomes a legally recognized group to which

everyone either belongs unambiguously or does not. For castes with state-allocated benefits and privileges, certificates are to be obtained to prove membership and hence validate claims.²²

... a transformation has been achieved of the far less tidy, less uniform and more ambiguous divisions of society in preceding centuries which we saw still represented clearly in the results of Risley's great experiment at the start of the century.²³

The current debate as to whether Untouchables replicate or reject the caste system which devalues them illustrates the danger here of creating an unreal problem by misreading the nature of the category.²⁴

... the concept sets up a category defined as the bottom of a hierarchically ordered society but in practice traps and equates a variety of castes differently placed economically, socially, culturally and politically.²⁵

B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement

No discussion on caste is complete without examining the thoughts of B.R. Ambedkar. He was an intellectual giant who turned to politics during the Indian nationalist movement. Ambedkar received a doctorate from Columbia University under the renowned American philosopher, John Dewey. He fought for India's freedom and being from the Mahar jati, championed the cause of all lower castes, which included taking on his Hindu compatriots in the nationalistic struggle.

We examine Ambedkar's major positions on four topics relevant to this book. The following table lists the four major writings of Ambedkar we have studied. Each is discussed in a separate section.

Ambedkar and Caste

Ambedkar had a complex relationship with Gandhi. The flashpoint was the issue of caste bias. Both agreed that there was deplorable mistreatment and inhuman bias against the lower castes and untouchables, but they had fundamental disagreements on how to resolve the problem. Gandhi wanted to maintain caste as an intrinsic part of Hinduism and make amendments to get rid of the abuses. Ambedkar, however, wanted nothing short of total rejection of the caste system. Gandhi referred to Dalits as Harijans and worked hard to re-educate Hindus to accept them with dignity. Ambedkar felt this was a patronizing way to 'accommodate' the Dalits and did not go deep enough toward dismantling the abusive structures.

An important debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi includes Ambedkar's most direct, no-nonsense statement on caste. The background to this statement is interesting. A Hindu reformist group had invited Ambedkar to deliver a speech on the caste system at their annual conference in 1936. Ambedkar sent them an advance copy of his speech for printing and distribution. The organizers were upset by several passages as they were critical of Hinduism and asked for them to be deleted. Ambedkar categorically refused. The organizers abruptly cancelled his talk.⁵ Ambedkar published his speech independently as an essay titled, *Annihilation of Caste*. It is likely (though unproven) that he made the published version even harsher against Hinduism to express his anger at the narrow-mindedness of the Hindu leaders he was confronting. This essay became a watershed event that started a vibrant debate among Indian nationalists.

Gandhi wrote a response to Ambedkar's essay and published it in his magazine, *Harijan*. Ambedkar followed up by writing a rejoinder to Gandhi, critiquing his *Harijan* article point by point.

For our analysis we have reorganized Ambedkar's essay into broad themes. There are several areas where *our positions coincide with his and contradict what the Global Left is claiming today*. For instance, he

rejects the Western view that castes are separate races, writing: ‘To hold that distinctions of castes are really distinctions of race, and to treat different castes as though they were so many different races, is a gross perversion of facts’.⁶ He later reiterates this view in the same essay: ‘The Caste system does not demarcate racial division. The Caste system is a social division of people of the same race’.⁷ This is a major departure from present-day Dalit scholars who insist that Dalits are a separate race from other Hindus. This is a fundamental flaw in the Afro-Dalit movement that conflates Dalits with Black Americans.

Ambedkar says that the untouchables in one region of India are different from those in another region. Therefore, they cannot be clubbed together as a single race. He writes: ‘What racial affinity is there between the untouchable of Bengal and the untouchable of Madras?’⁸ What he is saying is that while untouchables are a social division, they are not a homogeneous race or group.

An important statement comes after he has rejected Hinduism on grounds of caste. Despite this rejection, he feels that the *Upanishads* could be the basis for a new doctrine of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. He writes:

You must give a new doctrinal basis to your Religion—a basis that will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity; in short, with Democracy. I am no authority on the subject. But I am told that for such religious principles as will be in consonance with Liberty, Equality and Fraternity, it may not be necessary for you to borrow from foreign sources, and that you could draw for such principles on the *Upanishads*.⁹

Though he uses the essay to announce that he is withdrawing from Hinduism, he wants to maintain harmony, rather than ill-will, towards Hindus. He addresses his Hindu opponents: ‘Even when I am gone out of your fold, I will watch your movement with active sympathy, and you will have my assistance for what it may be worth. Yours is a national cause’.¹⁰

However, his core message strongly opposes Hindu texts as well as practices. The overall

assessment is captured in the following: 'Turn in any direction you like, and Caste is the monster that crosses your path. You cannot have political reform, you cannot have economic reform, unless you kill this monster'.¹¹ This is his commentary on the Hindu society during his time.

Ambedkar's crisp and logical criticism of caste is impressive. He breaks down his argument into the following sharp statements. We summarize his views using mostly his own words along with some paraphrasing:¹²

- Divisiveness among laborers: Caste is not merely a division of labor. 'It is also a division of laborers. ... It is a hierarchy in which the divisions of laborers are graded one above the other'.
- Suboptimal economic use of individual talent: Caste prevents society from optimally using every individual's capacity because it assigns tasks to individuals in advance based on the social status of the parents. Changes in industries demand mobility to embrace new occupations whereas caste artificially freezes a worker. Nor is the division of labor based on free choice, personal sentiment, and preferences. It is based on 'the dogma of predestination'. Consequently, 'Caste does not result in economic efficiency'.
- Fragmentation among Hindus: Caste is not uniting the Hindus but keeping them fragmented. 'The Caste System prevents common activity; and by preventing common activity, it has prevented the Hindus from becoming a society with a unified life and a consciousness of its own being'. One result is that 'Caste prevents Hinduism from being a missionary religion'. Stated differently, there are separate caste-specific grand narratives rather than an overarching Hindu or Indian grand narrative. Ultimately, the loyalty is mainly to one's caste. 'This anti-social spirit, this spirit of protecting its own interests, is as much a marked

feature of the different castes in their isolation from one another as it is of nations in their isolation. ... The Hindus, therefore, are not merely an assortment of castes, but are so many warring groups, each living for itself and for its selfish ideal’.

- Indifference towards bigger causes: ‘Indifferentism is the result of the Caste System, which has made Sanghatan [community, congregation] and co-operation even for a good cause impossible’. As a result of this, ‘Caste deprives Hindus of mutual help, trust, and fellow-feeling’. In fact, the opposite is the case. Rather than helping each other, ‘The higher castes have conspired to keep the lower castes down’.
- Blocking reform: Those enjoying caste privileges want to maintain its structures and prevent reform. ‘Caste in the hands of the orthodox has been a powerful weapon for persecuting the reformers and for killing all reform’.

Frankly, we find this diagnosis to be true, honest, and audacious. It is a provocation that Hindu reformists in 1935 ought to have heard, debated, and contemplated rather than uninviting Ambedkar. An excellent chance for genuine reform was lost by the narrowmindedness of the Hindu leaders like Gandhi. We cannot rewind time and determine whether India’s future might have been different if the Hindu leaders had not become so defensive, and had, instead, collaborated with Ambedkar to explore various changes.

Ambedkar then moves on to discuss what ought to be done about these caste problems. He proposes: ‘My ideal would be a society based on *Liberty, Equality and Fraternity*’.¹³ This echoes the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. It is ironic that his followers today have turned the movement into identity politics and Critical Race Theory whereas the French Revolution emphasized *individual* freedom and rights. The relationship must be between each citizen individually and the state, *with no group identity serving as the intermediary* between

citizens and the state. This point has been emphasized by France's president, Emmanuel Macron in his recent fight against Critical Race Theory.

Ambedkar asks: What, then, prevents this from happening? Inter-dining to bring all castes together had already become prevalent but he finds this falling short. He wants inter-marriages which will bring about the necessary changes:

Inter-dining has not succeeded in killing the spirit of Caste and the consciousness of Caste. I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-marriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin, and unless this feeling of kinship, of being kindred, becomes paramount, the separatist feeling—the feeling of being aliens—created by Caste will not vanish.¹⁴

He now turns to Hinduism as the factor that is blocking the necessary reforms. His verdict against Hinduism is devastating:

Internal reform of the Caste System is virtually impossible. ... Caste has a divine basis. You must therefore destroy the sacredness and divinity with which Caste has become invested. In the last analysis, this means you must destroy the authority of the Shastras and the Vedas.¹⁵

In elaborating his attack on Hinduism, he explains his understanding of what Hinduism is. Let us quote him first, followed by our response. We will discuss whether he truly understands Hinduism broadly enough.

What is this Hindu Religion? Is it a set of principles, or is it a code of rules? Now the Hindu Religion, as contained in the Vedas and the Smritis, is nothing but a mass of sacrificial, social, political, and sanitary rules and regulations, all mixed up. What is called Religion by the Hindus is nothing but a multitude of commands and prohibitions. Religion, in the sense of spiritual principles, truly universal, applicable to all races, to all countries, to all times, is not to be found in them; and if it is, it does not form the governing part of a Hindu's life. That for a Hindu, Dharma means commands and prohibitions.¹⁶

This is a reductionist view of Hinduism. Ambedkar sees it as nothing more than a set of dogmatic rules, totally devoid of all spirituality. In this pronouncement, he does not seem to consider the various dimensions, such as:

- Profound philosophies contained in the *Upanishads*.
- Body-mind practices of yoga and meditation that have no restrictions based on caste whatsoever. There are numerous *shastras* on this subject.
- The entire Tantra system that is free from any form of birth-based privilege and is entirely in the control of each practitioner.
- The Bhakti movement that was an example of very successful uprisings from within Hinduism to open doors for all segments of society. There have been many such mobilizations that transgressed the 'rules' which justifiably troubled Ambedkar.

Given this narrow understanding of Hinduism, he proceeds to declare the following:

I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed, and I say there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion. ... It is your bound duty to tear off the mask, to remove the misrepresentation that is caused by misnaming this Law as Religion. ... what they are told is Religion is not Religion, but that it is really Law, you will be in a position to urge its amendment or abolition.¹⁷

We wonder if Ambedkar would apply the same logic to the Greek classics. After all, Aristotle was a staunch defender of slavery. Both Plato and he also advocated infanticide. If Ambedkar applied the same criteria, the Greek classics would have to be banned along with almost all major European Enlightenment thinkers from Georg Hegel onwards. Should we desist from learning from the Enlightenment thinkers? Furthermore, the American founding fathers too were guilty of theories and practices that are today condemned as violations of human rights and even criminalized.

We could take the conversation further back to the Bible in which there is no paucity of atrocities ranging from slavery to rape. Ambedkar's call to get rid of a vast tradition because it also contains objectionable material ought to require him to make a similar demand for dismantling Judeo-Christianity in total.

More recently, Albert Einstein's diaries have shown that he made racial slurs against the Chinese. Would physicists want to reject all his theories based on that premise?

We agree that Hindu texts ought to be examined for modern times and selectively adopted. Where applicable there ought to be a fresh interpretation, even a rewrite to avoid misunderstandings. This approach is advocated by the *smritis* themselves. For instance, *Manusmriti* 4.176, advocates flexibility in its own implementation. It

boldly states: One should give up any particular aspect of dharma if it is denounced by the public. The fact that many smritis were written over several centuries and often presented opposing views, is testimony to the flexibility of dharma to adapt and not be closed like the Abrahamic books. Many mainstream Hindu organizations, the Arya Samaj being a prominent example, have modified and reinterpreted the *Manusmriti* to suit modern times.

Ambedkar makes his concrete suggestions to Hindus on how they ought to reform Hinduism. He lists the ‘cardinal items’ essential to this ‘reform’. The first is a rather extreme form of the old Abrahamic tradition of burning books and outlawing their usage. This is contrary to Ambedkar’s espoused liberal thinking and totally out of line with Buddhism that he embraced. He says:

There should be one and only one standard book of Hindu Religion, acceptable to all Hindus and recognized by all Hindus. This of course means that all other books of Hindu religion such as Vedas, Shastras, and Puranas, which are treated as sacred and authoritative, must by law cease to be so, and the preaching of any doctrine, religious or social, contained in these books should be penalized.¹⁸

This is a bad suggestion. In fact, no Buddhist would appreciate a similar intervention by Ambedkar to ban all Buddhist books except one.

His second item for Hindu reform is to abolish priesthood, or else to remove the hereditary criteria for becoming a priest. The fact is that there is a range of temple traditions on the selection of priests, including those that *only select a lower caste priest by birth*. But Ambedkar goes too far and wants the state to control priesthood the

same way they certify civil servants. He says, 'It should be provided by law that no Hindu shall be entitled to be a priest unless he has passed an examination prescribed by the State.' In fact, he wants to make it a penal offense for anyone officiating as a priest without a government license. Every priest 'should be the servant of the State'. The state should limit the number of priests so that it is not a free-for-all system.

As noted earlier, Gandhi responded to this scathing article by Ambedkar, defending the caste system and wanting to reform it only to a limited extent. He wanted the basic structures to remain but without any prejudices towards the Harijans. This did not satisfy Ambedkar, who retorted:

I appreciate greatly the honor done me by the Mahatma in taking notice in his Harijan of the speech on Caste. ... My object in publishing the speech was to provoke the Hindus to think, and to take stock of their position.

He believed caste had ruined the Hindus and the varna system was 'like a leaky pot' that has an inherent tendency to degenerate into an abusive caste system. The principles of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity were an absolute necessity. This required that 'the sense of religious sanctity behind Caste and Varna must be destroyed'. Therefore, the 'divine authority of the Shastras' must be discarded. No compromise was acceptable.

Ambedkar and Islamophobia

Islam was another major area of disagreement between Ambedkar and Gandhi. Gandhi appeased the Muslims, even supporting their global agenda outside India. Ambedkar, on the other hand, considered both Islam and Christianity dangerous options for Indians to adopt because he feared it would tear apart the fabric of Indian society.

Ambedkar's rejection of Hinduism is well-known, but it is falsely assumed that he was positive towards Islam, or at least neutral. This false assumption is made today to support the Global Left's strategic alliance with Islam. The Dalit movement is now aligned with Blacks in America and Muslims worldwide and has become grounded in new forms of Marxism such as Critical Theories of various kinds.

Given the attempts worldwide to block criticisms of Islam, it is important to examine what would today be considered Ambedkar's Islamophobia. He writes that though Hindu society's social problems are widely discussed, he finds it utterly hypocritical that the same kind of open criticism is not given to Islam. To remedy this situation, he devotes much space in his tome of nearly five hundred pages, *Pakistan: The Partition of India*, to criticize Islam point by point.

His rigor, candidness, and audacity are remarkable, and it is surprising that despite his explicit and harsh condemnation of Islam, this work by him has received little attention.¹⁹ We will quote him extensively because his views on the matter are being covered up by mainstream academicians.

He starts his scathing analysis by saying: 'One may well ask if there is any social evil which is found among the Hindus and is not found among the Muslims'. He then says, 'Take child-marriage', and using a table of statistics he makes the case that Islam suffers from this scourge worse than Hinduism.²⁰

His next topic is the position of women. He says, 'The Muslim woman is the most helpless person in the world'. Here he cites a Muslim leader to elaborate: 'Islam has set its seal of inferiority upon

her and given the sanction of religion to social customs which have deprived her of the full opportunity for self-expression and development of personality'. His lengthy analysis concludes with the verdict: 'No words can adequately express the great and many evils of polygamy and concubinage, and especially as a source of misery to a Muslim woman'.²¹

He then takes up slavery in Islam and writes:

Islam speaks of brotherhood. Everybody infers that Islam must be free from slavery and caste. Regarding slavery nothing needs to be said. It stands abolished now by law. But while it existed, much of its support was derived from Islam and Islamic countries. While the prescriptions by the Prophet regarding the just and humane treatment of slaves contained in the Koran are praiseworthy, there is nothing whatever in Islam that lends support to the abolition of this curse.²²

Apparently, the prophet tolerated slavery and merely wanted that slaves not be ill-treated.

He then points out that Islam continues to have an appalling caste system. To explain this, he cites census data and other sources. Islam has designated most of its people as low castes and even untouchables:

The Mahomedans themselves recognize two main social divisions, (1) Ashraf or Sharaf and (2) Ajlaf. Ashraf means 'noble' and includes all undoubted descendants of foreigners and converts from high caste Hindus. All other Mahomedans including the occupational groups and all converts of lower ranks, are known by the contemptuous terms, 'Ajlaf,' 'wretches' or 'mean people':

they are also called Kamina or Itar, 'base' or Rasil, a corruption of Rizal, 'worthless.' In some places a third class, called Arzal or 'lowest of all,' is added. With them no other Mahomedan would associate, and they are forbidden to enter the mosque to use the public burial ground.²³

Ambedkar then elaborates each of the Ashraf, Ajlaf, and Arzal castes by listing the sub-castes within them. For instance, the Saids, Sheikhs, Pathans, and Moghuls are in the top caste. Most Muslims belong to the lower castes. Finally, he names the communities condemned as the untouchables in Islam.

He is especially troubled by the purdah system: 'Indeed, the Muslims have all the social evils of the Hindus and something more. That something more is the compulsory system of *purdah* for Muslim women'. He writes:

As a consequence of the purdah system, a segregation of the Muslim women is brought about. The ladies are not expected to visit the outer rooms, verandahs, or gardens; their quarters are in the back-yard. ... young and old, are confined in the same room. No male servant can work in their presence. A woman is allowed to see only her sons, brothers, father, uncles, and husband, or any other near relation who may be admitted to a position of trust. She cannot go even to the mosque to pray and must wear burka (veil) whenever she has to go out. These burka women walking in the streets is one of the most hideous sights one can witness in India. Such seclusion cannot but have its deteriorating effects upon the physical

constitution of Muslim women. They are usually victims to anaemia, tuberculosis, and pyorrhoea. Their bodies are deformed, with their backs bent, bones protruded, hands and feet crooked. Ribs, joints and nearly all their bones ache. Heart palpitation is very often present in them. The result of this pelvic deformity is untimely death at the time of delivery.

Purdah deprives Muslim women of mental and moral nourishment. Being deprived of healthy social life, the process of moral degeneration must and does set in. Being completely secluded from the outer world, they engage their minds in petty family quarrels, ... they become narrow and restricted in their outlook. They lag behind their sisters from other communities, cannot take part in any outdoor activity and are weighed down by a slavish mentality and an inferiority complex. They have no desire for knowledge, because they are taught not to be interested in anything outside the four walls of the house. Purdah women in particular become helpless, timid, and unfit for any fight in life.²⁴

Ambedkar says the immorality of Muslim men is caused by purdah, because these men lack normal social contact with women. Isolation leads to unhealthy tendencies and sexual excesses according to him:

The physical and intellectual effects of purdah are nothing as compared with its effects on morals. The origin of purdah lies of course in the deep-rooted suspicion of sexual appetites in both sexes and the purpose is to check them by segregating the sexes. ...

purdah has adversely affected the morals of Muslim men. ... a Muslim has no contact with any woman outside those who belong to his own household. Even with them his contact extends only to occasional conversation. For a male there is no company of, and no commingling with, the females, except those who are children or aged. This isolation ... is sure to produce bad effects on the morals of men. It requires no psychoanalyst to say that a social system which cuts off all contact between the two sexes produces an unhealthy tendency towards sexual excesses and unnatural and other morbid habits and ways.²⁵

The isolation also leads to segregation between Muslims and others, he claims. Furthermore, it causes Muslims to be unconcerned about the broader politics and social well-being of the nation: 'The evil consequences of purdah are not confined to the Muslim community only. It is responsible for the social segregation of Hindus from Muslims which is the bane of public life in India'.

Ambedkar next accuses Muslims of lacking political sensibilities beyond petty and selfish matters:

The Muslims have no interest in politics as such. Their predominant interest is religion. This can be easily seen by the terms and conditions that a Muslim constituency makes for its support to a candidate ... does not care to examine the programme of the candidate. ... he should agree to replace the old lamps of the masjid by supplying new ones at his cost, to provide a new carpet for the masjid because the old one is torn, or to repair the masjid because it has become dilapidated. ... a

Muslim constituency is quite satisfied if the candidate agrees to give a sumptuous feast, and in other[s] if he agrees to buy votes for so much apiece. With the Muslims, election is a mere matter of money, and is very seldom a matter of [a] social programme Muslim politics takes no note of purely secular categories of life, namely, the differences between rich and poor, capital and labour, landlord and tenant, priest and layman, reason and superstition. (it) is essentially clerical and recognizes only one difference, namely, that existing between Hindus and Muslims. None of the secular categories of life have any place in the politics of the Muslim community; and if they do find a place—and they must, because they are irrepressible—they are subordinated to one and the only governing principle of the Muslim political universe, namely, religion.²⁶

What troubles him the most, he says, is the utter lack of any social movement to shake up the Muslims and improve their own lot:

But far more distressing is ... there is no organized movement of social reform among the Musalmans of India on a scale sufficient to bring about their eradication. The Hindus have their social evils. But there is this relieving feature about them—namely, that some of them are conscious of their existence, and a few ... are actively agitating for their removal. The Muslims ... do not realize that they are evils, and consequently do not agitate for their removal. ... they oppose any change in their existing practices. ... Muslims opposed the Child-Marriage Bill brought in the Central Assembly

in 1930, whereby the age for marriage of a girl was raised to 14 and of a boy to 18, on the ground that it was opposed to the Muslim canon law.²⁷

Digging deeper, Ambedkar explains the core of Muslim Canon Law according to which the world is divided into countries ruled by Muslims and those ruled by non-Muslims, i.e., infidels. There is no room for true democracy in such a system:

According to Muslim Canon Law, the world is divided into two camps, Dar-ul-Islam (abode of Islam), and Dar-ul-Harb (abode of war). A country is Dar-ul-Islam when it is ruled by Muslims. A country is Dar-ul-Harb when Muslims only reside in it but are not rulers of it. That being the Canon Law of the Muslims, India cannot be the common motherland of the Hindus and the Musalmans. It can be the land of the Musalmans—but it cannot be the land of the ‘Hindus and the Musalmans living as equals.’ Further, it can be the land of the Musalmans only when it is governed by the Muslims. The moment the land becomes subject to the authority of a non-Muslim power, it ceases to be the land of the Muslims. Instead of being Dar-ul-Islam, it becomes Dar-ul-Harb.²⁸

When Muslim ruled countries cannot defeat non-Muslim countries, he says they resort to ‘the extremist concept of Islamic Jihad’. He summarizes this as follows:

There is another injunction of Muslim Canon Law called

Jihad (crusade) ... it becomes “incumbent on a Muslim ruler to extend the rule of Islam until the whole world shall have been brought under its sway. ... Technically, it is the duty of the Muslim ruler, who is capable of doing so, to transform Dar-ul-Harb into Dar-ul-Islam.” And just as there are instances of the Muslims in India resorting to Hijrat, there are instances showing that they have not hesitated to proclaim Jihad.²⁹

On the issue of a Muslim’s loyalty to his country vis-a-vis his loyalty to Islam, Ambedkar exposes the potential duplicity:

... one that calls for notice is the tenet of Islam which says that in a country which is not under Muslim rule, wherever there is a conflict between Muslim law and the law of the land, the former must prevail over the latter, and a Muslim will be justified in obeying the Muslim law and defying the law of the land...The only allegiance a Musalman, whether civilian or soldier, whether living under a Muslim or under a non-Muslim administration, is commanded by the Koran to acknowledge is his allegiance to God, to His Prophet and to those in authority from among the Musalmans...

30

Because Hindus are non-believers of Islam, they are designated as kafirs. This makes them unworthy of respect by Muslims. As a result, no government with Hindus at the top can be acceptable to Muslims, be it democratic or not:

To the Muslims, a Hindu is a Kaffir. A Kaffir is not worthy of respect. He is low-born and without status. That is why a country that is ruled by a Kaffir is Dar-ul-Harb to a Musalman. ... no further evidence seems to be necessary to prove that the Muslims will not obey a Hindu government. The basic feelings of deference and sympathy, which predispose persons to obey the authority of government, do not simply exist. But if a proof is wanted, there is no dearth of it. It is so abundant that the problem is what to tender and what to omit...In the midst of the Khilafat agitation, when the Hindus were doing so much to help the Musalmans, the Muslims did not forget that as compared with them the Hindus were a low and an inferior race.³¹

Contrary to popular opinion in the mainstream, Ambedkar is convinced that Islam is highly divisive and tribalistic:

Hinduism is said to divide people and in contrast, Islam is said to bind people together. This is only a half-truth. For Islam divides as inexorably as it binds. Islam is a close corporation and the distinction that it makes between Muslims and non-Muslims is a very real, very positive and very alienating distinction. The brotherhood of Islam is not the universal brotherhood of man. It is a brotherhood of Muslims for Muslims only. There is a fraternity, but its benefit is confined to those within that corporation. For those who are outside ... there is nothing but contempt and enmity.³²

After many pages of this kind of analysis of the horrors of Islam,

Ambedkar wonders, 'why are the Muslims opposed to social reform?' To answer this, he first goes through the reasons cited for Muslims worldwide being retrograde. He notes that Muslims have been globally declared 'an unprogressive people'. Islam has immobilized them 'in their native barbarism ... it is fixed in a crystallization, inert and impenetrable. It is unchangeable; and political, social or economic changes have no repercussion upon it'. He quotes the French orientalist, Joseph Renan on the Muslim hatred for science:

What is ... essentially distinctive of the Musalman is his hatred of science, his persuasion that research is useless, frivolous, almost impious—the natural sciences, because they are attempts at rivalry with God. ³³

Ambedkar delves deeper into the situation specifically in India and concludes that Muslims define themselves as Hindus' opponents. They must constantly compete against Hindus: 'Their energies are directed to maintaining a constant struggle against the Hindus for seats and posts, in which there is no time, no thought and no room for questions relating to social reform'. He says the Muslims do not want to collaborate with Hindus for social justice even when there is common cause.³⁴

For instance, he feels that poor Muslims do not align with poor Hindus to fight the rich of all religions, because they do not want to fight a rich Muslim landlord. Brotherhood among Muslims takes priority over any, and all, kinds of social justice. This is evident in the way Muslims agitate against states ruled by Hindus but not against states ruled by Muslims even when it is the exact same issue. He writes:

The dominating consideration with the Muslims is not

democracy. ... (it) is how democracy with majority rule will affect the Muslims in their struggle against the Hindus. Will it strengthen them, or will it weaken them? If democracy weakens them, they will not have democracy. They will prefer the rotten state to continue in the Muslim States, rather than weaken the Muslim ruler in his hold upon his Hindu subjects. The political and social stagnation in the Muslim community can be explained by one and only one reason. The Muslims think that the Hindus and Muslims must perpetually struggle.³⁵

Ambedkar does not even spare Gandhi, who he considers a hypocrite for protecting Muslims and for overriding his espoused principles: 'He [Gandhi] has never called the Muslims to account even when they have been guilty of gross crimes against Hindus'.³⁶ Ambedkar goes on to condemn Muslims' killings of Hindus in India and is troubled that Gandhi fails to criticize such behavior:

Mr. Gandhi has been very punctilious in the matter of condemning any and every act of violence and has forced the Congress, much against its will to condemn it. But Mr Gandhi has never protested against such murders [of Hindus]. Not only have the Musalmans not condemned these outrages, but even Mr Gandhi has never called upon the leading Muslims to condemn them. He has kept silent over them.³⁷

Ambedkar writes about the infamous riots by Muslims against Hindus:

The blood-curdling atrocities committed by the Moplas in Malabar against the Hindus were indescribable. All over Southern India, a wave of horrified feeling had spread among the Hindus of every shade of opinion, which was intensified when certain Khilafat leaders were so misguided as to pass resolutions of 'congratulations to the Moplas on the brave fight they were conducting for the sake of religion'.³⁸

Despite all this horror, Gandhi praised them as the 'brave God-fearing Moplas who were fighting for what they consider as religion and in a manner which they consider as religious'.

Any objective reading of Ambedkar's extensive writings on Islam would find him to be Islamophobic by the criteria being applied today.

Ambedkar and Buddhism

Ambedkar wrote *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, a major tome that gives a lucid explanation of his interpretation of Buddhism. In the Introduction, he lays out what he rejects in the standard interpretations. The most relevant aspect he rejects is the very essence of Buddha's teachings: the Four Noble Truths, or the Four Arya Truths. Ambedkar writes:

The four Aryan Truths are a great stumbling block in the way of non-Buddhists accepting the gospel of Buddhism. For the four Aryan Truths deny hope to man. ... make the gospel of the Buddha a gospel of pessimism. Do they form part of the original gospel or are they a later accretion by the monks?³⁹

His rejection of the concept of rebirth is ridden with contradictions. On the one hand, he says outright that there is no such thing as rebirth in Buddhism, while on the other, he says that the Buddha was a Bodhisatta (Bodhisattva in Sanskrit), a concept based on rebirth that he explains as follows:

Before enlightenment Gautama was only a Bodhisatta. It is after reaching enlightenment that he became a Buddha. Who and what is a Bodhisatta? A Bodhisatta is a person who is seeking to be a Buddha. How does a Bodhisatta become a Buddha? A Bodhisatta must be a Bodhisatta for ten lives in succession. ... In his tenth life he becomes Dharmamegha. The Bodhisatta attains the infinite divine eye of a Buddha.⁴⁰

He describes specifically what the Bodhisatta achieved in each of the prior nine lives before becoming the Buddha in the tenth. The entire tradition of the Dalai Lama and the Bodhisatta is based on rebirth.

The reason for this contradiction is clear: Since Ambedkar wanted to distance himself from the concept of reincarnation in Hinduism, he wanted it deleted from Buddhism, a religion he had adopted. The flaw is that the Buddha himself says that he recalls many of his own previous lives.

Ambedkar's understanding of both Hinduism and Buddhism is erroneous regarding whether the self reincarnates. This is his way to claim their irreconcilable metaphysical differences. Our brief analysis below shows how reincarnation fits into both systems despite having different ideas on the ultimate self:

- Hinduism has the notion of the ultimate Self (*atman*), and that Self is never born and never dies. Hence, that is not what reincarnates. The entity that reincarnates is something lesser, called the *jiva-atman*, which is the bodily form manifested by the Self, and is not the same as the Self.
- In Buddhism there is a stream of consciousness comprising momentary states with no permanent self or substratum. The experience of Self is an illusion. There is no 'entity' as such that reincarnates, but there is reincarnation as a process. Karma produces imprints on consciousness called *sanskara* or *vasana*. The energy of the *sanskara* is like a seed that produces an effect called *phala*. Upon the body's death, the *sanskaras* that remain unfulfilled set up the rebirth of a new body. But there is no Self that undergoes reincarnation.
- In one system (Hinduism) the ultimate Self exists but is not what takes birth or dies. In the other system (Buddhism) there is no ultimate Self. Hence, neither system believes that any ultimate Self reincarnates.

Ambedkar is also mistaken in his understanding of karma in Hinduism. He says that the Hindu idea of karma is based on the 'soul', but soul is an Abrahamic concept and hence it causes confusion. Though Buddhism does not have an entity that accrues karma, it says that the *sanskaras* or *vasanas* are karmic imprints that influence the process by which effects are produced. So, it doesn't discard karma.

Another serious conflict between Ambedkar and standard Buddhism is his attitude towards meditation. Buddha's Eightfold Path is his prescribed method for all Buddhists to follow. The seventh and eighth steps in this path are mindfulness and *dhyana* systems of meditation. The seminal Buddhist texts, *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* and *Visuddhimagga*, emphasize several systematic meditation techniques that Buddha practiced for his own awakening. Buddha's entire teaching is that these are universal paths available to everyone, and that he is teaching *only what he has experienced and nothing else*.

But Ambedkar bypasses, or under-emphasizes, meditation in his interpretation of Buddhism. For him, meditation is merely the pursuit of education and mental cultivation. To any serious Buddhist, meditation is different from ordinary mental activity, and the entire basis of Buddhism is lost if meditation is trivialized.

Having done away with these core tenets of Buddhism, he invents a new version. At a press conference he called in October 1956, Ambedkar formally rejected Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism along with Hinduism. He launched his own Navayana Buddhism, just about six weeks before his death. The formal oath ceremony for his followers to join this new movement comprised twenty-two vows. Though one of them gives lip service to Buddha's Eightfold Path, there is no mention of meditation whatsoever.⁴¹

In essence, Ambedkar has secularized Buddhism and uprooted its spiritual dimension:

- He rejects the traditional idea of *nirvana* or enlightenment as something too otherworldly and escapist.

- He considers it irresponsible to spend too much time on meditation practice because it takes one away from social relationships.
- He does not believe nirvana to be a spiritual attainment but a social construct referring to a society founded on harmony and justice. Ambedkar's goal was to change Buddhism to a system of social justice. He wanted his version of Buddhism to nurture democracy with justice for untouchables and others.

It is important to note, however, that Ambedkar didn't consider spirituality to be worthless. He was merely attempting to remove untouchability that he felt was rooted in Hindu metaphysics. His problem arose because Buddhism shared much of the same metaphysics as Hinduism, making it impossible for him to adopt it without changes.

Ambedkar's followers have attempted to equate his movement with the kind of Buddhism that was brought to the West by the late Vietnamese monk, Thich Nhat Hanh. Westerners call this 'engaged Buddhism' because it uses meditation and other practices to raise human consciousness towards problems that confront society and the environment. It then applies Buddhist ethics and insights gained from practicing meditation to help alleviate suffering and injustices through social and political activity. Great emphasis is placed on non-violence, non-attachment with materialism, protection of animals and nature, and peace-making. But this is a difficult comparison because Ambedkar's version does not include meditation, which is where Thich Nhat Hanh's Buddhism begins. As a result, Ambedkar's Buddhism is strictly political.

Despite espousing what amounts to a secular form of Buddhism, Ambedkar claimed to oppose secularism; he wanted to operate within religion as his framework. He said: 'Those who deny the importance of religion fail to realize how great is the potency and sanction that lies

behind a religious ideal as compared with that of a purely secular ideal.⁴² In an All India Radio broadcast in 1954, he said that secular mandates could be broken while religion has to be respected by everyone.⁴³ In other words, although his movement stripped Buddhism of key spiritual elements and turned it into a purely social justice movement, Ambedkar wanted to call it a religion to give it the sanctity that religion, and particularly Buddhism, had.

Regarding Christianity and Islam, he said:

What the consequences of conversion will be to the country as a whole is well worth bearing in mind. Conversion to Islam or Christianity will de-nationalize the Depressed Classes. If they go to Islam, the number of Muslims will be doubled...and the danger of Muslim domination also becomes real. If they go to Christianity ...it will strengthen the hold of Britain on the country.⁴⁴

He described his choice of Buddhism as the least harmful route for India since he considered Buddhism part and parcel of Indian culture.

His motive was simple. Ambedkar was a staunch Indian nationalist and consistent in his priority to advocate a religion that would be good for Indian culture. His thinking is represented in the table below:

Ambedkar and Communism

An important study done by Ambedkar was his comparison of Buddha and Karl Marx. This was later published as a small book, *Buddha or Karl Marx?*⁴⁵ He starts by saying that both systems oppose private ownership of property as that causes misery and suffering. The difference between them is in the methods to be used.

He then analyzes their methods and shows why Buddhism is superior to Marxism. The key difference is that Buddha wanted to first bring an inner transformation in a person's moral disposition and follow his path voluntarily, whereas Communism uses violence and imposes dictatorship. He writes:

... the means adopted by the Buddha were to convert a man by changing his moral disposition to follow the path voluntarily. The means adopted by the Communists are equally clear, short and swift. They are (1) Violence and (2) Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Communists say that there are only two means of establishing communism. The first is violence. Nothing short of it will suffice to break up the existing system. The other is dictatorship of the proletariat. Nothing short of it will suffice to continue the new system. It is now clear what are the similarities and differences between Buddha and Karl Marx. The differences are about the means. The end is common to both.⁴⁶

Ambedkar says that in trying to achieve their valuable goals, communists destroyed other valuable things. 'Could they not have taken property without taking the life of the owner?' he asks. In the long run therefore, he considered Buddha's voluntary approach

superior to Communism's use of force.

The important difference, he says, is between external force being applied (in Communism) versus the individual being transformed from within (in Buddhism): 'One has to choose between Government by force and Government by moral disposition'.⁴⁷ He details a sermon by Buddha to show the difference between a rule by righteousness and a rule by force. Giving the example of the Russian Communist revolution, he says that the changes they achieved cannot be sustained except by force. When the force is withdrawn, there will be anarchy.

This is probably the finest picture of what happens when moral force fails, and brutal force takes its place. What the Buddha wanted was that each man should be morally so trained that he may himself become a sentinel for the kingdom of righteousness.⁴⁸

He says that only religion can sustain the change after force is withdrawn. He offers the Russians a lesson: 'The Russians do not seem to be paying any attention to Buddhism as an ultimate aid to sustain Communism when force is withdrawn'.⁴⁹

Dictatorship is problematic for him because it requires ongoing force to sustain it. Buddha opposed this: 'As to Dictatorship the Buddha would have none of it. He was born a democrat and he died a democrat'.⁵⁰ The benefit of democracy is clear: 'In Parliamentary Government you have a duty and a right; the duty to obey the law and right to criticize it. In Dictatorship you have only duty to obey but no right to criticize it'.⁵¹

Dictatorship could be good only short-term just to bring about a safe democracy. 'Why should not Dictatorship liquidate itself after it has done its work, after it has removed all the obstacles and boulders in the way of democracy and has made the path of Democracy

safe?’⁵² He considered permanent dictatorship unjustified because it destroys spiritual values: ‘Humanity does not only want economic values, it also wants spiritual values to be retained. Permanent Dictatorship has paid no attention to spiritual values and does not seem to intend to’.⁵³

Ambedkar is proud that thousands of years before the Russians brought Communism, Buddha had already implemented it on a small scale in his sangha, and without resorting to force or dictatorship:

The Russians are proud of their Communism. But they forget that the wonder of all wonders is that the Buddha established Communism so far as the Sangh was concerned without dictatorship. ... it was a communism on a very small scale, but it was ... without dictatorship, a miracle which Lenin failed to do. The Buddha's method was different. His method was to change the mind of man: to alter his disposition: so that whatever man does, he does it voluntarily without the use of force or compulsion. His main means ... was his Dhamma and the constant preaching of his Dhamma. The Buddhas (sic) way was not to force people to do what they did not like to do although it was good for them. His way was to alter the disposition of men so that they would do voluntarily what they would not otherwise to do.⁵⁴

His ideal society would be one that achieves the aspirations of the French Revolution but with individuals acting voluntarily:

Society has been aiming to lay a new foundation that was summarized by the French Revolution in three words: Fraternity, Liberty and Equality. The French

Revolution was welcomed because of this slogan. It failed to produce equality. We welcome the Russian Revolution because it aims to produce equality. But in producing equality, society cannot afford to sacrifice fraternity or liberty. Equality will be of no value without fraternity or liberty. It seems that the three can coexist only if one follows the way of the Buddha.⁵⁵

In a nutshell, the best way to achieve the goals of both Communism and the French Revolution is through the path of Buddha. Neither managed to achieve their stated goals, but Buddha had achieved them long ago.

The problem with his argument, as we discussed earlier, is that Ambedkar has already rejected the core tenets of Buddhism which include meditation. Buddhism requires one to first undergo a profound inner transformation and only *then* play an external role to help society. But Ambedkar does not accept the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism or its recommended meditation practices.

In essence, Ambedkar is sandwiched between Buddha and Marx, unable to follow either system fully. At one end, he has serious tensions with Buddhism as taught by Buddha. These disagreements are both with the foundational metaphysics of Buddhism (like reincarnation and karma) as well as with its meditation systems. At the other end, he wants to use Buddhism and its spiritual transformation to argue against Marxism.

So, he invokes Buddhism *as redefined by him* to make his argument against Marxism. The problem with this is that he offers Buddhism's solution without agreeing to its core tenets or practices.

This is a serious flaw: On what basis does he claim such a method would work? Isn't it a fact that Ambedkar's primary teachers of Buddhism were books and not a living guru as required by the tradition? He was not a Buddhist in the conventional sense with a

teacher initiating him into meditation and other practices. Has Ambedkar achieved spiritual transformation bypassing Buddha's prescribed path of meditation?

If Ambedkar's newly formulated Buddhism is to be taken seriously, and not seen as mere speculation, he would have to base it on actual experience. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he correctly points out that everything Buddhism teaches is based on what has been empirically tested in practice. Buddha only taught what he knew first hand through personal inner experience. The same criteria must be applied to Ambedkar's new system. He can teach only what he has attained within himself. But Ambedkar never made any claims of having used his new methods to attain spiritual transformation.

In his system, the spiritual tools of Buddhism were rejected while the social justice goals were never demonstrated in practice, not even in a small pilot group. And yet, he rejects Buddha's method, substituting it with his own. It is unfortunate that he did not live longer, as that would have given him the opportunity to establish his ideas based on empirical results as did Buddha.

Despite all the achievements at the material level, humankind continues to be driven by the ego, and largely by the tribal ego of selfishness, greed, lust, attachments to bodily cravings, and so forth. In other words, precisely those mental afflictions that Buddha asked his followers to rid themselves of. The central thesis of Buddhism is that the problems we face cannot be solved at this level of mind. What is needed is a spiritual evolution beyond the ego.

Ironically, many of those doing lip service to Ambedkar have little commitment to practice Buddha's method and evolve their consciousness, and *then* become better positioned to help society. Instead, they bypass this serious inner work and crave political, social, or other kinds of power, all behind the lofty claim of being Buddhists. The figure below summarizes Ambedkar's philosophy as discussed.

The Pros and Cons of Jati/Caste

In this chapter¹ we give an overall assessment of the jati/caste system. The British economist, Angus Maddison, said that India was the richest country in the world until almost 1800, by which time the British were aggressively dismantling India's economic engine. Such a prolonged period of great prosperity does not fit with the assumption that caste, since ancient times, had made India economically regressive. Let us take a balanced view of the key advantages and disadvantages of this system.

Checks and Balances Against Totalitarianism

The jati structure was a system of decentralized self-governance in which numerous semi-autonomous social groupings provided services to their respective members. This is the reason for India's diversity of languages, customs, spiritual practices, popular arts, and culture – greater than any other country in the world.

As long as the jatis functioned based on their own local traditions, this structure was able to maintain a massive and diverse society without the need for centralized control. It avoided concentration of power in any varna or social capital. This was dismantled by the British because their interests were different and required top-down colonial control.

In the case of Brahmins, the *Dharmashastras* define a clear separation of ritual status from material power. Brahmins are to exercise ritual authority, and this was considered a responsibility they must carry. Their obligation to society is to pursue knowledge and preserve the Vedic tradition. It is not a 'privilege' as such because Brahmins are not allowed to seek either political authority or accumulate wealth. A Brahmin is not to solicit gifts or compensation and may only receive the material goods he needs for his livelihood. Accumulation beyond his maintenance leads to degradation as per the *Dharmashastras*.²

In the case of Kshatriyas, their duty (particularly of kings) is to maintain law and order, protect dharma and defend the public. They are not given any absolutist or dictatorial power. Their duty is to consult their ministers, listen to people, and address their grievances. The ministry comprised representatives of all sections of society including Shudras.

The *Dharmashastras* also provide for the removal of a king by his ministers with the support of the public in case he fails to uphold dharma or protect people and their property. Though in practice one cannot claim there was perfect governance, the point is that there was

vibrant discussion, and political thought advanced from one era to another.

During the British rule, many decentralized functions became consolidated under civil servants trained and appointed by the British. These British appointees served two primary purposes: In the upward direction, they collected taxes (at extortionist levels) that drained the Indian economy from being one of the world's wealthiest to one of the poorest. In the downward direction, the colonial civil system served the purpose of maintaining control through police, courts, and army – all of which reported to the British in an elaborate system of governance.

The British controlled the economy by enacting laws on who could engage in a particular economic activity. They controlled the education system; native education based on Sanskrit and other Indian languages got dismantled and replaced by English with the pedagogy and reading material determined by people sitting in London. They controlled religious life through a variety of laws such as the colonial control of Hindu temples and their daily administration (which has still not been dismantled). Civil servants controlled the physical environment, and this included massive deforestation projects to supply Britain's Industrial Revolution.

Division of Labor and Transmission of Expertise

We have seen how the initial social mobility and fluidity of varnas and jatis was later lost. There was no public education as we have today, and from an early age children imbibed skills and knowledge from their parents. Gradually, nepotism set in and merit-based varna turned into a birth-based jati system. Occupations became associated with families and there was reduced mobility.

Epigraphic records show that many professional jatis were wealthy and well-organized, and strong professional associations known as *gana* emerged. Shudras could advance socially even to become kings; except they were not allowed to perform rituals reserved for Brahmins.³

While Vaishyas and Shudras had professional associations or guilds, there was no such organization for Brahmins like a Church with its hierarchy of archbishops, bishops, and so on. This refutes the claim that Brahmins enforced the 'caste system'. In fact, they did not have any organizational mechanism to enforce anything. With all these instruments of power in the hands of non-Brahmins, it would be impossible for them to exert control.

The Brahmins' power came simply from the fact that they could refuse to perform a ritual and refuse to transmit their knowledge. It was a negative form of power rather than a positive act of asserting power over others.

Inter-dependency of Jatis: The Jajmani System

Jatis in Indian villages were always economically co-dependent and no single jati was self-sufficient without the rest of the village ecosystem. This is because none of them enjoyed absolute control over all the resources of the village. Most villagers tended to follow the traditional occupational specialization of their jatis. This specialization led to a healthy exchange of services. The relationship between the jatis was not contractual, individual, or temporary but based on long-term mutual trust.⁴

This is the *jajmani* system of traditional occupational obligations and is still prevalent in some measure in rural India. It was a system of inter-jati reciprocity.⁵ Each jati plays a specific role in the overall village life. The role comprises economic, social, and moral functions and involves social support as well as economic exchanges.⁶ The following example illustrates how the jajmani system functions:

... at the birth-feast of a child, Brahmin presides over the ceremony of 'Nama Samskaran' (giving a name), Sunar (goldsmith) provides the gold ornament for the new born, Dhobi (washerman) washes dirty clothes, Nai (barber) carries messages, Khati (carpenter) provides wooden stool (patta) on which the child is kept for ceremony, Lohar (blacksmith) provides kara (iron bangle), Kumhar (potter) provides kulhar (jugs) for keeping cooked vegetables and drinking water, Pasi provides patal (leaf-plates) for taking food, and Bhangi (scavenger) cleans the place after the feast. All people who help receive the gifts of food, money and clothes depending partly on custom, partly on jajman's influence, and partly on the recipient's entreaty.⁷

The jajmani system comprises a network of roles and norms integrated organically and legitimized and supported by cultural values.⁸ The system maintains the division of labor and economic inter-dependence of jatis.⁹ The traditional method of payment in most regions is made during harvest; each landowning farmer distributes the newly produced food grains to various jatis. Additional payments may also be in the form of land for a house, areas for animals to graze, wood and cow dung fuel, loans for tools, and so forth. In addition, the landowning farmer gives clothes and gifts on ceremonial occasions and may also loan money in emergencies.¹⁰

For instance, the village officials or community servants (e.g., the watchmen) maintain jajmani relations with the whole village. Thus, a watchman's family gets a contribution at harvest from every landowner farmer's family in the village. The village servants may also have tax-free use of village land. Such families have rights to serve all those who live in a particular section of the village.¹¹

Decentralized Lobbying

The jatis developed their own *panchayats* (jati-specific governance) to decide their internal affairs with no involvement of the king. This was an efficient and inexpensive way to settle many disputes internally. It also brought local stability because despite invasions and upheavals at the level of the king, the local life at the village level continued to function. It was a decentralized system of welfare and similar to democracy in some ways. This has been a reason for the long-term survival of Hinduism at the grassroots.

Gradually, the jatis became more disconnected and ossified. The panchayats enforced endogamy to maintain unity and strength of the jati. They could send someone into exile for a serious crime, considered a terrible disgrace.

In modern times, many jatis have merged to form bigger caste groups, each with its own political lobbies negotiating with mainstream society or central government. These caste groups are mainly political vote banks and much of their traditional function has dissipated.

Ecological Role

Jati groups had mutual understandings to define their professional boundaries. Only the fishermen jati went out to fish, only the farmer jati practiced agriculture, and only the chamar jati had the right to the dead animal's skin. Even among the fishermen, there were multiple jatis each specializing in a specific type of fishing. Over time, the jati panchayats evolved rules to prevent too much fishing, for instance, thereby avoiding destroying their stock of fish. There were jatis with the responsibility to preserve the sacred groves for the benefit of the entire village.

This way, the jati system reduced competition for natural resources and avoided over-exploitation. The internal specialization of a given jati ensured the efficient inter-generational flow of competence in specialized skills. The resources required by a given profession were better protected than would be the case with open competition in a free market system. The restrictions of professional territories among the jatis served as a form of limiting rivalries.

On the positive side, this was a harmonious steady-state equilibrium between societies and nature. On the negative, this slipped into stagnation and lack of innovation driven by competition.

Economic Security

There developed a system of making annual payments in kind or cash, as soon as harvesting was done, for services rendered by village artisans, barbers, washermen, agricultural laborers and the like. The system of payment was not on quantity of output but the principle that landowners should take care of the local village workers and included expenditures for special situations and adversities. This evolved into a patron-client relationship in which landowners had power over the other working-class families. Naturally, as with any asymmetric situation, there were abuses and atrocities of all kinds. Harmony would break down into conflicts. Such tensions are not due to any 'evil Brahmin conspiracy' resulting from the *Vedas* or any such thing. This is simply class conflict among competing interests at the local level.

Though the economic system could optimize the use of local resources and demands, it was sub-optimal in the face of production and trade on a larger scale.

Jatis and Introvertedness: The Problem

A jati-based social ecosystem did have several advantages. Communities focused on managing their own affairs autonomously without the need to engage excessively with each other. There was a demarcation of the economic turf and boundaries. Each jati had its own leaders, customs, deities, rituals and festivals, 'laws' and adjudication of disputes. 'I mind my business and you mind yours' was the posture towards outsiders. This was a key to India's immense diversity because thousands of distinct cultures evolved in separate, and largely isolated, cocoons. It also allowed harmony because jatis were not prone to interfere in each other's lives.

At the same time, this disinterestedness in macro affairs beyond the boundaries of one's jati also developed into apathy towards outsiders. Ambedkar criticized this point as well: 'Indifferentism is the result of the Caste System, which has made Sanghatan and co-operation even for a good cause impossible'.¹² Since one's selfish interests were not impacted by whatever was going on elsewhere, there was little reason to keep track of external events.

Unfortunately, India's isolationism meant it could easily become outdated in understanding external threats. Though waves of invaders had entered and created havoc in other parts of India, the wealthy and powerful kingdoms of the time did little to send scholars to the invaders' lands to study them, i.e., to do what the tradition calls *purvapaksha*, or the objective understanding of opponents. Therefore, outsiders understood India and its people better rather than the other way around.

There were many counter examples of Indian rulers uniting to fight a foreign enemy. But this was mostly reactive when the enemy was already at the gates. They were not proactively coming together to pre-empt enemies and even conquer them. Indians lacked the expansionist mentality of the conqueror, being self-contented within their own local affairs. Therefore, Indians did not develop large-scale

team building skills the way, for instance, the Romans did as part of their foreign campaigns and imperial rule.

Some would say that Indian traditions are not conducive to local kings and communities coming together for bigger causes, but we beg to differ. Krishna in the *Mahabharata* exemplifies the visionary who brings many disparate groups together to fight that cause of dharma. If the kind of jati fragmentation we describe above had been desirable, Krishna would not have strived to unite various leaders. Therefore, the excuse that Indians are supposed to be fragmented as a mark of lofty spiritualism is just that, an excuse. When personal selfish interests are at stake, Indian communities do come together, so why not act collectively in situations that are not driven by selfish factors. Otherwise, the proverbial Mother Teresa is needed to save Indians because their fellow-Indians wash their hands off social responsibility in times of need.

This inward focus is consistent with the teachings of Vedanta. Unfortunately, it has also led to lowering one's expectations in life rather than maximizing the joy of living. Indian traditions *do* want us to enjoy material comforts provided it is done in a dharmic way and not in violation of dharmic norms.

In conclusion, we feel that a lingering negative effect on the Indian mind has been the internalizing of jati fragmentation and introvertedness. This is yet another reason to update the social systems in keeping with the times and the latest technologies.

The Collapse of the Caste System

The original dynamics of the system were disrupted and undermined by many social and political upheavals. Over time, varna became jati, which then morphed into caste. The caste system is now mostly dead, but its ghost continues to haunt India.

The result of modern democracy and social mobility is a new kind of system which is primarily one of vote banks and lobbying for resource allocation. Public education and job mobility have reduced the interests of the younger generations to follow in the footsteps of their parents. Technologies and economic trends have rendered old models obsolete.

There is very little left of the traditional varna roles in practice. Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Shudras and Dalits by birth are seldom limited to the roles assigned to them by tradition. Everyone, regardless of birth, freely moves into whichever profession they want to and for those they can compete in the marketplace.

Many old professions have disappeared, and some of the most promising ones include those that did not exist in the past. Some previously 'dirty' professions like leather work are now multibillion dollar global industries run by ultra-wealthy industrialists. The old taboo and stigmas have lessened due to technology. For instance, when an elitist customer at a fancy bar in India orders a drink, he is unconcerned about the varna/jati/caste identity of the bartender.

Unfortunately, the old vocabulary of identities is still in use even though the referents are entirely different. This has caused confusion. People think that today's Brahmin is like the ancient one and therefore all his flaws are blamed on the *Vedas*.

We can conclude that the origins, sustenance, and dismantling of the caste system has been independent of Hinduism. It was always purely a social phenomenon that happened to be in a largely Hindu society. The *Dharmashastras*, including the *Manusmriti*, were descriptive of the social reality at the time and place, and not

prescriptive. The *Manusmriti* (IV.176) clearly states that any rule ought to be rejected if it leads to unhappiness and indignation.

The collapse of the caste system does not pose a threat to Hinduism's survival. Hinduism is like a banyan tree with many different systems of roots, trunks, and branches, with no single point of failure.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This primer began with an overview of the social structures envisioned by Vedic society. These structures anticipated the problems of capital distribution and power struggles the world is facing. *The goal was to create a sustainable inclusive society that flourishes on diversity.*

Unfortunately, the passage of time and circumstances led to many deviations from that vision. As a result, these distorted versions have become established in many circles. The claim is made that they were built into the *Vedas*, and hence these problems are regarded as the essence of Hinduism. Western Universalism's premises are used against Hinduism.

Such an entrenched bias requires an audacious correction. We hope this primer will supply arguments to defend the Hindu point of view and serve as a primer to educate the community from the standpoint of their own heritage.

Below are some areas that serve as guidelines to debate and frame arguments when faced with critiques of Hinduism through a Western lens:

- Western norms and ideas get mapped onto other cultures without considering their distinct histories, cultures, and civilizational worldviews. But by reversing the gaze upon the West, one needs to ask questions about the peculiarity of the West, such as: Why did secularism come about? What conflicts led to the separation of Church and state? Have Western solutions solved the social problems in the West?
- Hindu ideas and practices are often taken out of context. For example, when a varna-based lifestyle is not followed by individuals and the varna-ashrama infrastructure does not

exist in a society, the resulting caste system cannot be seen as a reflection of a true Vedic society.

- In particular, one must challenge whether caste can be equated to race. And one must question the assumption that a numerical majority necessarily implies a dominant (and oppressive) community. In India's case, disproportionate power can belong to a community with small numbers, such as the Christian control of educational institutions and certain corporate functions like human resources departments.
- Ancient Indian practices are often viewed through a modern lens, but other religions are not subject to the same standards. For instance, similar harsh standards are not applied to Christianity and Islam.
- Islamic colonization is being ignored when colonization is discussed. The argument that the Mughals settled in India and became 'native' is false. A similar argument in the US would claim that White settlers should not be considered oppressors of the Native Americans because Whites did settle and consider America their home.
- The problem of digestion is serious. The West has been disassembling Hinduism into components, isolating them from their context and inherent unity, and selectively appropriating whatever is deemed useful. The Hindu sources get downgraded and eventually side-lined, and a new history fabricated showing the Western origins of these cultural and scientific achievements. What remains of Hinduism is thus depleted of its positive qualities, rendering it vulnerable to negative portrayals.

We will summarize our response to a few accusations and contentious debates that Hindus commonly face today. In doing so, it

also highlights some inherent weaknesses of the dominant Western solutions to the common social problems in the world.

Myth 1: Hinduism is inseparable from caste

We have shown that caste as practiced today does not reflect the ideals espoused by a Hindu society. Conversely, caste and caste-like prejudices are prevalent in societies that are not of Vedic origins. Therefore, Hinduism is neither necessary nor sufficient for the existence of today's caste system.

The ancient Varna system was re-engineered under colonial rule to result in the modern caste system. Blaming caste abuse today back onto ancient history is a mischaracterization of Hindu dharma as the cause of social oppression. Such claims do not explain how Valmiki (author of the *Ramayana*), or Vyasa (author of the *Mahabharata*) rose from the humblest strata to be revered by all. Nor does it explain how the great sage Vasishta achieved his brilliance despite being born in the most challenged community. Even Kalidasa, who is respected as the greatest Sanskrit poet, had humble origins.

Myth 2: Caste is responsible for India's backwardness, and this needs foreign intervention

Historical records show that India and its Hindu society outperformed Western societies of the same periods in terms of prosperity, social welfare, and internal harmony.

Furthermore, it solved its social problems by itself from within without any need for external interventions. While there remain unfortunate remnants of social biases in India, the history is complex and solutions that come from within the society's stakeholders are preferable to solutions from foreign entities.

A closer look at the varna-ashrama structure shows that when practiced correctly, it yields a diverse society living harmoniously with fellow humans and with nature. The areas of potential conflicts often emerge due to concentration of capital and power, and to prevent such conflicts the forms of capital are kept separate and decentralized in the varna-ashrama system. Everyone is considered a contributor in the interconnected cosmos and thus the varna-ashrama system helps a society optimize the management of resources, human capital, talent, and desires in a harmonious manner.

Myth 3: The caste system is designed to exploit Dalits

Every civilization, barring India has a recorded history of slavery. Also, most societies relied upon the exploitation of foreign lands for capturing additional slaves to sustain the status quo. Contrary to this, India never resorted to conquest of others for its own prosperity because its internal social system provided the human capital and ecosystem.

The varna-ashrama system ensured that no one in the ecosystem was exploited, while it also ensured that everybody contributed. Distribution of human capital and resources across vocations and functions prevented the need for exploitation human capital in the form of slavery.

Myth 4: The caste system is violent and causes fissures in society

A remarkable fact is that internal social violence was absent in the traditional varna-ashrama system. Given India's massive social diversity, this harmony was on a large scale across a large population and continued for a long period of history.

A similar level of diversity with internal harmony has not been achieved by the modern social structures despite democracy and secularism. Western social systems are stratified based on class, where class is largely defined by material wealth. There is tremendous pressure to move up the class hierarchy. Such pressure results in mental health challenges as well as social tensions and violence.

On the other hand, in the varna-ashrama structure, the different forms of capital are distributed across the varnas: No varna is superior to another because each has its own domain. The skills and competencies are diverse, which builds self-esteem in individuals belonging to all the varnas. This excellence in specific domains of competence helps the economy and increases each community's pride. Varna pride born out of contribution to society and excellence in one's domain is so deep that there is no pressure to move across to another varna.

Therefore, traditional India did not experience violence among the varnas. Every community played a vital role in the social-economic-spiritual space, felt special and proud about its status and contribution to society. Each is compensated with domain specific capital.

Myth 5: Only upper caste individuals can amass power and wealth

The exact opposite is true in the traditional interpretation. Brahmins are, in fact, forbidden from accumulating material wealth. And many kings have been of the Shudra varna, including the great Maratha warrior, Shivaji, and so forth. Also, local leaders were usually Shudras and could amass considerable power as in the case of the Nayaks in Tamil Nadu.

The various varna and jati identities are not for sake of dominating others. Nor are they an organizing mechanism for demanding rights for some group. In other words, identity politics and divisiveness are a product of modern times and not what the tradition wants.

The purpose of identity in the varna-ashrama system is simply this: Every identity has a distinct *svadharma* (one's personal calling) associated with it that prescribes a yajna or specific contribution to the society.

Myth 6: Western approaches to diversity and sustainability are superior to Vedic approaches

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programs that are based on the divisive Critical Race Theory are the mechanisms to attain sustainability. We question this model of diversity and inclusion. For one thing, this 'diversity' requires an individual to demonstrate fidelity to Wokeism where differences of opinion are suppressed under the rubric of Cancel Culture. Dissent is not tolerated, which means DEI is not ideologically inclusive. Individual identity is shunned, and group synthetic identities are encouraged. As we have already shown, where there is no true diversity of thought, sustainability suffers.

The Western DEI-based sustainability is a tool to control the masses and silence the dissenters. This is already resulting in a divisive society in the West and wherever elsewhere these dangerous social theories are being exported. Western ideas of sustainability are being imposed on the rest of the world through the United Nations, World Economic Forum, the education system, and industry. These top-down structures are being imposed in a heavy-handed manner in the guise of saving humanity, but the fact is that a new generation of elites and leaders is being developed that will obey these mandates.

The Vedic approach to sustainability is different and truly decentralized. It is built on deep structures of harmony with nature. The ultimate Vedic goal is to journey from the Vyavaharika (worldly/sensory) realm to the Paramarthika (transcendental) realm by rising above the individual ego's endless desires that drive hyper-consumption.

This is in contrast with the Western model of sustainability that manipulates nature through technology to fulfil human desires of limitless consumption. As a result, the Western sustainability model being touted through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals and corporate ESG programs is resulting in divisive societies with increasing concentrations of power and resources in the hands of the

global elites.

Notes

Chapter 1: The Vedic Open Architecture

1 (Mek 2022)

2 (Mek 2022)

3 (Mek 2022)

4 See: 'American leadership in advancing the SDGs to achieve equity and sustainability'. Retrieved on January 11, 2023 (<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2020/11/12/american-leadership-in-advancing-the-sdgs-to-achieve-equity-and-sustainability/>)

Chapter 2: Varna, Jati, and Caste

1 (Ahuja 1993, 287)

2 (Ahuja 1993, 286)

3 (Ahuja 1993, 287)

4 (Ahuja 1993, 288)

5 (Ahuja 1993, 288)

6 (Ahuja 1993, 292)

Chapter 3: A Brief Social History

1 Examples are Kavasa of *Rig Veda* and Mahidasa of *Aitreya Aranyaka*.

2 (Majumdar 2001, 546-47)

3 (Aiyangar 1934, 55)

4 (Law 1943, 350)

5 (Jaiswal 1998, 15)

6 (R. S. Sharma 1998, 58)

7 (Majumdar 2001, 548)

8 (U. Singh 2013, 168-69)

9 (Eraly 2007, 166)

10 (Eraly 2007, 166)

11 (Ambedkar, Who were the Shudras? 1979, 22)

12 Sharma, R.S. *Sudras in Ancient India*, p. 29, Motilal Banarsidass, New Delhi, 1958 as cited in (A. Sharma 2000, 142)

13 See: 'The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* | Swami Krishnananda'. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (https://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/Brihadaranyaka_Upanishad.pdf p. 39)

14 (A. Sharma 1996)

15 Rg *Veda* V 60.5. Translated by (Pandurangi 1999, 3)

16 (Radhakrishnan 1953)

17 (A. Sharma 2000, 136)

18 As quoted in: (A. Sharma 2000, 165)

19 (Gupta 2000, 190)

20 (Saha 2020)

21 (Saha 2020)

22 For many examples, see: (A. Sharma 2000, 132-80).

23 *Apastambha dharmasutra* may have supported untouchability, but it is rarely read by practicing Hindus. It seems to be read mainly by those looking for ways to attack Hinduism. Most Hindus have never heard of it. And many other better known *dharmashastras* differed, 'Badari espoused the cause of the shudras and propounded the view that all (including shudras) were entitled to perform Vedic sacrifices.' See: '*History of Dharmashastra (Ancient and Medieval Religions and Civil Law in India). Volumes I-V*'. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (https://indianculture.gov.in/indian-culture-repository?search_api_fulltext=History%20of%20Dharmasastra&f%5B0%5D=parent_library_ic_repository%3AArchaeological%20Survey%20of%20India). And Ambedkar mentions that though the *Dharmashastras* says in one place that a Shudra is not entitled to upanayana, the text *Samskara Ganapti* explicitly declares Shudras to be eligible for it. He also shows that Jaimini, the author of *Purva Mimamsa*, said that Shudras could perform Vedic rites. Ambedkar cites *Bharadwaja Srouta Sutra* (v. 28) and *Katyayana Srouta Sutra* (1 & 5) to show the eligibility of shudras to perform Vedic rites. See: 'Shudras and the Counter Revolution' in (Ambedkar, Writings and Speeches. Vol. 3 1989a, 423)

24 (Olivelle 2005, 124)

25 (Olivelle 2005, 185)

26 (Olivelle 2000, 359)

27 (Chattopadhyaya 2014, 95)

28 (Olivelle 2000, 361)

29 (Ahmad 1988, 236)

30 (Olivelle 2000, 69)

31 (Olivelle 2005, 103)

32 (Kane 1941, 161)

33 (Kane 1941, 170)

34 (Kane 1941, 170)

35 (Kane 1941, 168)

36 (Kane 1941, 173-76). Similarly, the *Smṛtyarthasāra* states that no problem occurs upon physical contact on public roads leading to a market, in religious processions, in temples, during festivals, in sacrifices, at sacred places, in calamities or invasions of the country, on the banks of large sheets of water, in the presence of great persons, or when there is a fire or other calamity.

37 Also, *Apastambha Dharmasūtra* says that Shudras may cook food for the masters of the higher castes. (Datta 1944, 27)

38 (R. N. Sharma 1977, 55)

39 *Rig Veda* (X.45.6). These included four from each varna and a fifth who was outside the varnas, i.e., a Dalit. Yaska in his *Nirukta* (VI.7) says this. See (Mookerji 1969, 52).

40 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 63)

41 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 68)

42 (McClish and Olivelle 2012, lxiv)

43 (Datta 1944, 30)

44 For instance, the *Baijavapa Grhya Sūtra* says that seven samskaras are allowed to the Shudra from *garbhadhana* to *caula*. The view of lawgiver Apararka appears to be that the eight samskaras from *garbhadhana* to *caula* were meant for all the varnas, including the Shudras. According to the *Madanaratna*, *Rupanarayana* and the

bhashya of Harihara as quoted in the *Nirṇayasindhu*, the Shudras were entitled to perform six saṃskaras and the five daily mahayajnas. (Kane, History of Dharmashastra 1941, 198)

Chapter 4: Distortions About Caste

1 See: ‘Lingayat SCs, OBCs may not welcome minority tag’. *The New Indian Express*. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (<https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/karnataka/2018/mar/23/lingayat-scs-obcs-may-not-welcome-minority-tag-1791248.html>)

2 For example: In the *Sigala Jataka*, Buddha denounces a man from a low varṇa for wanting the hand of a Kshatriya girl. In the *Simhakotthuka Jataka*, a monk of inferior birth wants to recite the religious texts monks born in higher varṇas were reciting, but Buddha rebukes him saying that the monks born in superior varṇas were like lions while he was like the offspring of a jackal. He is likened with the ass who wants to acquire the status of a lion by wearing the lion-skin. (Goyal 1987, 283)

Also, in the *Kannakathalasutta* Buddha says, ‘There are these four varṇas – Kshatriyas, Brahmins, Vaishyas and Shudras, of these four varṇas, two – the Kshatriyas and the Brahmins are given precedence in salutation, homage and obeisance’. (Datta 1944, 177)

3 (Goyal 1987, 285)

4 For example: Buddhist masters like Sariputra, Maudgalyayana, and Mahakashyap were all Brahmins. In the later Buddhist order, the intellectual stalwarts in philosophy, logic, ethics, poetry and drama were almost entirely from the Brahmin varṇa. Buddhist exemplars like Ashvaghoṣa, Nagarjuna, Aryadeva, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga, Dharmakīrti, and Dharmottara were born in Brahmin families, educated in Vedic lore, and reared in the orthodox Vedic tradition. They were intellectual giants that produced erudite works on dialectics and logic that established many of the core tenets of Buddhist philosophy. (Goyal 1987, 271-72)

5 (Goyal 1987, 392)

6 (Goyal 1987, 392)

7 (Goyal 1987, 419)

8 (Goyal 1987, 392)

9 (Goyal 1987, 397)

10 (Siddiqui 2014, 80)

11 (Siddiqui 2014, 80)

12 (Kapur 2010, 195)

13 (Biswas 2016)

14 (Biswas 2016)

15 (Biswas 2016)

16 (EWTN Global Catholic Network 2003)

17 See: ‘Maneesha Panchakam’. Chinmaya Mission. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (https://www.v0.chinfo.org/images/userupload/Reflections/05_Manisha_Panchakam.pdf) and “manIShApanchakam”. Sanskrit Documents. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (<https://sanskritdocuments.org/sites/snsastri/Manishapanchakam.pdf>)

18 See: ‘Sanskritisation’ in (Srinivas 1971)

19 For example, one of the earliest Vedic texts, *Satapatha Brahmana*, refers to a Shudra king performing an important Vedic *yajna*. (Eggeling 1900, 397); *Satapatha Brahmana* (XIII.5.4.6), (Olivelle 2000, 131)

20 (Ambedkar, Who were the Shudras? 1979, 114)

21 (Roy 1923, 137)

22 (Ambedkar 1979, 119-22)

23 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 241)

24 See (Jayaswal 1934, 3) and (Jayaswal 1934, 45)

25 (Majumdar, History of Ancient Bengal 1971, 99)

26 See (Ray 2003, 98)

27 (A. Sharma 2015)

28 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 54)

29 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 48-49)

30 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 242)

31 (R. S. Sharma 1958, 53)

32 During Chhatrapati Shivaji’s time, Mahar, Mang, and Ramoshi

soldiers guarded the slopes and accesses to Maratha fortresses (Constable 2001, 447). The Ramoshis secured the hill forts while the Mahars and Mangs served in artillery and the garrisons. (Cadell 1938, 12) They were also intelligence agents, carrying out surveillance and misleading enemies. (Betham 1908, 141)

33 For example, Subedar Gopal Baba Valangkar (nineteenth Bombay Infantry), the Mahar leader in Dapoli in the late 1880s and a colleague of the social activist, Jyotirao Phule, called the Mahars ‘polluted Kshatriyas’. (Constable 2001, 446-47)

34 See: ‘ Indian Army’s Mahar regiment: Home to two army chiefs and a Param Vir Chakra’. *The Print*. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (<https://theprint.in/report/indian-armys-mahar-regiment-home-to-two-army-chiefs-and-a-param-vir-chakra/26313>)

35 (K. Singh 1993, 6)

36 The Jatav community of Uttar Pradesh refuse to be referred to as Chamars. According to *Lomash Ramayana*, which is found in Nepal, the Jatavs trace their ancestry to a direct lineage from Lord Shiva. In *Jatav Jiwan* (1924) and *Yaduvansh ka Itihas* (1942), the Jatavs are mentioned as a Kshatriya jati. The Dabgar (often considered Chamars), is a Dalit community spread across Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Their oral tradition traces their origin to Rajputs who were downgraded because they worked with the skins of dead animals. The Meghwal Scheduled Caste community is divided into several exogamous communities like Chauhan, Parmar, Solanki etc. Many of these names are of Rajput origin. The Chamars of Madhopur (in Uttar Pradesh) also consider themselves degraded Kshatriyas (K. Singh 1993, 326, 387, 939, 304).

37 (Agarwal 1934, 69). Also (Longer 1981, 4)

38 (Constable 2001, 448-49)

39 Some chapters of the *Yajur Veda* are entirely devoted to enumeration of various industries that belonged to them. For example: *Yajur Veda* 30.15 mentions leather workers (Charmakar or present day Chamars), *Yajur Veda* 16.27 and 30.7 mention textile workers

(Julahas), *Yajur Veda* 16.27 and 30.7 mention iron workers (Lohars or ironsmiths), *Yajur Veda* 16.27 and 30.6 mention Rathakar or the maker of chariots, *Yajur Veda* 16.46 and 30.6 mention the makers of bows and arrows, *Yajur Veda* 30.8 mentions the maker of nails and needles, *Yajur Veda* 30.12 mentions the sculptors or the maker of idols (Mahavir 2001, 116). Also, the *Atharva Veda* mentions that the craftsmen had very large residences and factories (See *Atharva Veda* 7.73.1. Also see (Mahavir 2001, 113).

40 (Mahavir 2001, 228)

41 (Mahavir 2001, 114)

42 For example, See *Rig Veda* 1.31.8, 1.31.9 and 8.46.3. Also See Pg. 112, *Vaidik Arthvyavastha*, Dr. Mahavir, Samaanantar Prakashan, New Delhi, 2001. Vedic mantras mention Shudra artisans who made iron weapons for the king in their factories and in return the king protected them, an indication of their cohesive and symbiotic relationship. (See *Rig Veda* 10.92.7 and *Rig Veda* 10.48.3.) The role of Shudras as engineers and architects continued in the later periods. During the Mauryan period, the area to the west of the royal palace was allotted to them for making woolen and cotton goods and armor (Sastri 1987, 79). A Shudra artisan community of the Andhra region that claimed to have originated from Vishvakarma (considered the divine architect in Hinduism) helped in the construction and repair of temples, chariots, temple ornaments, religious vessels, and images. The Vijayanagar kings (fourteenth-seventeenth century) gave them certain temple honors and privileges, such as walking in front of chariots and offering puja standing on the chariots in their traditional dress. Also, in the Andhra region, the Kancharas or brass-workers were Shudras, and an inscription of 1645 ce says that the ruler waived all their taxes and tolls because of their importance. The Uppara Shudra community provided civil engineering to dig wells and construct houses. They were also involved in removing silt from rivers to make them viable for shipping. Another Shudra community were the Kammaras who manufactured tools, implements and wares of iron

(Pandey 2015, Chapter 2).

43 For instance, in the Andhra region in the seventeenth-eighteenth century, several Brahmins and Kshatriyas worked under the Shudra chief of the village (Pandey 2015, Chapter 2).

44 (Kunhappa 1988, 2)

45 (Menon 2011, 133) Interestingly, in the *Mahabharata*, the twin Ashvins, physicians to the gods, are Shudras (R. S. Sharma 1958, 74).

46 (Datta 1944, 25)

47 The Indore copper-plate inscription (465-466 ce) of the Gupta emperor Skandagupta records an endowment that was made, and the interest was allocated to maintain the lamp in the temple of the Sun. The endowment was deposited with the guild of oilmen of Indrapura who invested it in their own business or lent it to others to gain interest. An inscription at Nashik from third century ce during the rule of King Isvarasena records the investment of an endowment with the guilds of potters, oil-millers, and others. An inscription from Junar (c. 1165 ce) records an investment with the guilds of bamboo-workers and braziers (Chakraborti 1960, 316-18). While some twelfth century records mention that Shudras traded in commodities prohibited for the Vaishyas, like salt, wine, curd, arms, poison, and so forth, the *Brihaspati Smriti* say that Shudras traded in all commodities. Also, *Kuvalayamala*, a Jain text from the eighth century ce, mentions Shudras being leaders of trade caravans. (S. Srivastava 2008, 51)

48 (S. Srivastava 2008, 53)

49 (Datta 1944, 27)

50 (Datta 1944, 148)

51 (Chakraborti 1960, 326)

52 For example, during the Maurya period such guilds were granted various concessions by the state. In the Andhra-Kushan period (c. 200-300 ce) and in the period of the Andhravityas there were guilds of weavers, druggists, corn-dealers, oil manufacturers, etc. In the Gupta period (c. 320-500 ce) there were guilds of oilmen, silk weavers, and architects (Datta 1944, 147-48). An inscription of

Emperor Vikramaditya II (c. 733-44 ce) in Karnataka shows that the state authorized the guild of brass-workers to collect taxes from the public (Chakraborti 1960, 318). The Siyadoni inscription (903 ce) of the Pratihara emperor, Mahendrapala I mentions guilds of potters, distillers of liquors, sugar-boilers, betel sellers, oil-makers, and stone cutters. Such guilds facilitated the task of the government and rendered useful service in organising society and administering justice in internal affairs (Tripathi 1989, 345-46).

53 The existence of wealthy Shudras is mentioned in the *Krishna Yajur Veda* and *Sama Veda*. The *Alinachitta Jataka* mentions a prosperous guild of weavers near Benaras. The Buddhist *Jataka* stories tell us that blacksmiths intermarried with rich jewellers. See (Datta 1944, 29) and (Chakraborti 1960, 314, 319).

54 (Datta 1944, 151, 155)

55 For example, the Mathura inscriptions of the Kushana period (first century ce) record the names of many prosperous Shudra donors who were blacksmiths, barbers, washermen, and so on. They donated money for building temples, roads, and other public amenities. A blacksmith named Gova, son of Siha is also heard of in the inscription to have dedicated an image of Sarasvati. Similarly, a blacksmith Nada of Kalyana is recorded to have given money to build a road in the Kanheri inscription. One inscription belonging to the Kushana period (first century ce) mentions the term 'Rajanapita' which means chief of barber's guild. The Mathura inscription of the Kushana period records the name of a donor called 'Rayagini' which means the wife of a dyer or a washerman. The Jatakas also mention about the guilds of dyers or washermen (dhobi). The Taxila casket inscription of Emperor Kanishka (first-second century ce) mentions a religious gift by an architect. Many records of the period mention a craft-guild of the *navakarmikas* (architects) who built universities and temples, and also did repairs. The Mandasar inscription of (c. 437-38 ce) of Gupta emperors speaks of a guild that built 'a noble and unequalled temple of the bright-eyed sun with the stores of wealth acquired by the craft'.

The artisans in the Gupta period were held in high esteem by the kings as shown by the Karitalai (c. 493-4 ce) and the Khoh (c. 497-512 ce) inscriptions. Inscriptions of Gurjara Pratihara (mid eighth to eleventh century) rulers of north India also show that persons following the same occupation normally formed themselves into organizations for regulating their business (Chakraborti 1960, 318-25).

56 They mention wealthy Shudra fishermen in India who hired many laborers to fish in the rivers. In another example, a Shudra is named as the owner of five hundred sheds for manufacturing earthenware, clearly a sign of flourishing entrepreneurs. Another Shudra woman is named as an affluent owner of a pottery business, and Jain monks frequently took shelter in such pottery shops and held them in high esteem. The Jain texts describe many prosperous towns with fine buildings, temples, gardens, roads, etc., where Shudra craftsmen resided and worked. They also point out that the leather industry was thriving and Shudra communities manufactured shoes, bags, musical instruments like drums, bellowing bags, sheaths, etc. (Jain 1980, 29, 56, 58)

57 (S. Srivastava 2008, 51)

58 (Basham 2004, 146)

59 (Basham 2004, 146). For instance, during the British period, the plan to set up a seminary in 1821 failed because the Shudra students refused to be seated with the Shanars and Paraiahs whom they considered lower to them. This was to be a boarding school, and the different castes were expected to dine together. For the Shudra students, this was an emotionally charged situation. As a result, parents withdrew their children. (Tschurennev 2019, 304)

60 (K. Singh 1993, 11)

61 (K. Singh 1993, 11)

62 (K. Singh 1993, 29)

63 (K. Singh 1993, 6)

64 (Dharampal 1983, 21)

- 65 (Dharampal 1983, 29)
- 66 (Dharampal 1983, 29)
- 67 (Dharampal 1983, 29)
- 68 (Dharampal 1983, 35)
- 69 (Tschurennev 2019, 41)
- 70 (Keay 1918, 148)
- 71 (K. Singh 1993, 10)
- 72 (K. Singh 1993, 11)
- 73 (K. Singh 1993, 4)
- 74 (K. Singh 1993, 5)
- 75 (K. Singh 1993, 3)
- 76 (K. Singh 1993, 302)
- 77 (K. Singh 1993, 307)
- 78 (K. Singh 1993, 314)
- 79 (K. Singh 1993, 314)
- 80 (K. Singh 1993, 318)
- 81 (K. Singh 1993, 3)
- 82 (K. Singh 1993, 25)
- 83 (K. Singh 1993, 27)
- 84 (K. Singh 1993, 29)
- 85 (K. Singh 1993, 1070)
- 86 (K. Singh 1993, 1072)
- 87 (K. Singh 1993, 1072)
- 88 (Russell 1916, 380-81)
- 89 (K. Singh 1993, 105-12)
- 90 (Das 2003, 378-79)
- 91 (Ghurye 1959, 4)
- 92 (K. Singh 1994, 10)
- 93 (K. Singh 1994, 12)
- 94 (K. Singh 1994, 3)
- 95 (K. Singh 1994, 293)
- 96 (K. Singh 1994, 293)
- 97 (K. Singh 1994, 295, 324, 336). See also: (Von Furer Haimendorf

and Von Furer Haimendorf 2022, 436, 439)

98 (K. Singh 1994, 118, 119, 127, 122)

99 (K. Singh 1994, 3, 773)

100 (K. Singh 1994, 774)

101 (K. Singh 1994, 776)

102 (K. Singh 1994, 776)

103 (Bag 1997, 106)

104 (K. Singh 1994, 842)

105 (A. Srivastava 1986, 18)

106 (A. Srivastava 1986, 18)

107 (A. Srivastava 1986, 20)

108 (K. Singh 1994, 436-38)

109 (K. Singh 1994, 436, 441-42)

110 For example, the Gaddi Rajput Scheduled Tribe of Himachal Pradesh claim they migrated from Lahore during the medieval period to escape the onslaught by the Muslim rulers (K. Singh 1994, 272-74).

111 For example, the great Veershaiva acharya and scholar, Sripati Panditacharya (thirteenth century ce) wrote a wonderful commentary on the *Vedanta Sutras* called *Srikara Bhashya*. The text begins with the following: ‘I have composed this for the benefit of the Virasaivas. The Virasaivas who have the knowledge of the Vedas and Agamas and their inner spiritual meanings; who are fired with the desire to attain moksha; who are followers of the Vedic path; and who are strict in following the tenets of pure Saivism’. (C. H. Rao 1936, 24) Rupa Gosvami, a great Vaishnava scholar of the sixteenth century ce, also made the same point in his *Bhaktirasamrtasindhu*, a massive treatise on bhakti-rasa. He said that devotion to the Lord must be in accordance with the scriptures, shruti and smriti. (Haberman 2003, 41)

112 (B. Srivastava 1957, 87)

113 (Neelotpal 2013, 20-21)

114 (Chauhan 2014, 59-61)

115 (Gupt 1986, 48)

116 (Ghorpade 2011, 196)

117 (Upadhyaya 1954, 583)

118 (Auti 1970, 16)

119 (Kunhappa 1988, 34)

120 (Kunhappa 1988, viii)

121 (Kunhappa 1988, ix)

122 See: (Hardgrave Jr. 1969) and (Rudolph and Rudolph 1967)

123 See: 'Business Class Rises in Ashes of Caste System'. *The New York Times*. Retrieved on February 15, 2022 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/11/world/asia/11caste.html>)

Chapter 5: British Social Engineering

1 (Charsley 1996)

2 (Charsley 1996)

3 The British Privy Council stated 'Clear proof of usage, outweighs the written text of the Law'. In 1833, the British Parliament established the Privy Council in 1833 as the judicial body that heard appeals from various courts of the British colonies including India.

4 (Dharampal 2003, 12)

5 As quoted in: (Chakravorty 2019)

6 As quoted in: (Chakravorty 2019)

7 (Charsley 1996)

8 (Charsley 1996)

9 (Charsley 1996)

10 There are many instances showing that endogamy was not rigidly followed. Many of the great rishis mentioned in the *Puranas* and *Mahabharata* had mothers who were Shudras, such as Parashara Muni, known as the author of the *Vishnu Purana*, who was born of a *shvapaaka* (literally one who cooks the flesh of dogs) woman. (R. S. Sharma 1958, 63) The *Dharmashastras* discuss the instance when a Brahmin has a Shudra son and advocate that if the father is Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya, the son should inherit half the property. (R. S. Sharma 1958, 247) This shows that such cases were sufficiently common. During the Gupta period too, there are records mentioning marriages between people of different varnas. Buddhist texts also bear

testimony to inter-marriages between persons of different varnas. For example, the *Matanga Jataka* mentions a merchant's daughter who became the wife of a *chandala*. (Datta 1944, 178)

11 As quoted in: (Chakravorty 2019)

12 As quoted in: (Chakravorty 2019)

13 (Charsley 1996)

14 (Charsley 1996)

15 (Charsley 1996)

16 (Charsley 1996)

17 (Charsley 1996)

18 (Charsley 1996)

19 (Charsley 1996)

20 (Charsley 1996)

21 (Charsley 1996)

22 (Charsley 1996)

23 (Charsley 1996)

24 (Charsley 1996)

25 (Charsley 1996)

Chapter 6: B.R. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement

1 (Ambedkar 1936)

2 (Ambedkar 1990)

3 See: Introduction of (Rathore and Verma 2011)

4 (Ambedkar 2015)

5 (Ambedkar 1936), Prologue

6 (Ambedkar 1936, 5)

7 (Ambedkar 1936, 5)

8 (Ambedkar 1936, 5)

9 (Ambedkar 1936, 24)

10 (Ambedkar 1936, 26)

11 (Ambedkar 1936, 3)

12 (Ambedkar 1936)

13 (Ambedkar 1936, 14)

14 (Ambedkar 1936, 20)

- 15 (Ambedkar 1936, 21)
- 16 (Ambedkar 1936, 23)
- 17 Ambedkar 1936, 23)
- 18 (Ambedkar 1936, 24)
- 19 (Ambedkar 1990)
- 20 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 21 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 22 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 23 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 24 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 25 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 26 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-I
- 27 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-II
- 28 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter XII-III
- 29 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter XII-III
- 30 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter XII-II
- 31 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter XII-III
- 32 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter XII-V
- 33 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-II
- 34 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-II
- 35 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter X-II
- 36 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter VII-III
- 37 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter VII-III
- 38 (Ambedkar 1990), Chapter VII-III
- 39 (Rathore and Verma 2011, xxix-xxx)
- 40 (Rathore and Verma 2011, 50)
- 41 (Omvedt 2003, 262)
- 42 (Ambedkar 1989a, 23)
- 43 (Ambedkar 1989b, 416-17)
- 44 As mentioned in (Ramteke 1983, 127)
- 45 (Ambedkar 2015)
- 46 (Ambedkar 2015, 5)
- 47 (Ambedkar 2015, 7)

- 48 (Ambedkar 2015, 7)
- 49 (Ambedkar 2015, 8)
- 50 (Ambedkar 2015, 6)
- 51 (Ambedkar 2015, 6)
- 52 (Ambedkar 2015, 8)
- 53 (Ambedkar 2015, 8)
- 54 (Ambedkar 2015, 8)
- 55 (Ambedkar 2015, 8)

Chapter 7: The Pros and Cons of Jati/Caste

1 Many ideas in this chapter are borrowed from (Nadkarni 2003).

2 (Kane 1990, 531)

3 (Kane 1990, 66-67, 121)

4 (Ahuja 1993, 322)

5 (Ahuja 1993, 322)

6 (Ahuja 1993, 322)

7 (Ahuja 1993, 323)

8 (Ahuja 1993, 324)

9 (Ahuja 1993, 325)

10 (Ahuja 1993, 326) Harold Gould, in his study of *jajmani* system in Sherpur village in Faizabad district in Uttar Pradesh in 1954-5 found payments in the form of free residence site, free food for family, free clothing, free food for animals, free timber, free dung, rent free land, credit facilities, opportunity for supplementary employment, free use of tools, aid in litigation etc.

11 (Ahuja 1993, 324)

12 (Ambedkar 1936, 11)

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